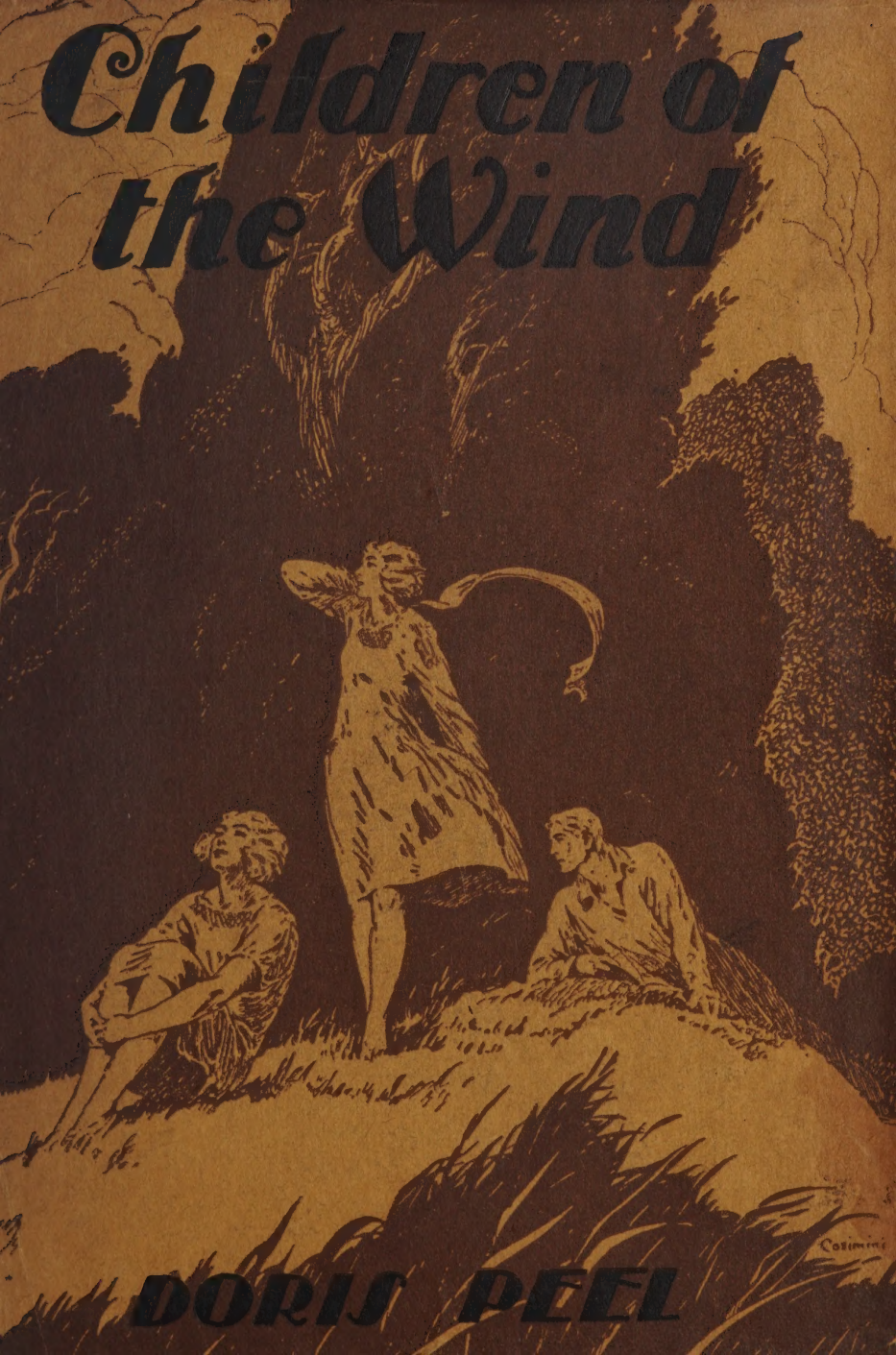
Children of the Wind



DORIS PEEL

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By Doris Peel

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Children of the Wind

DORIS PEEL

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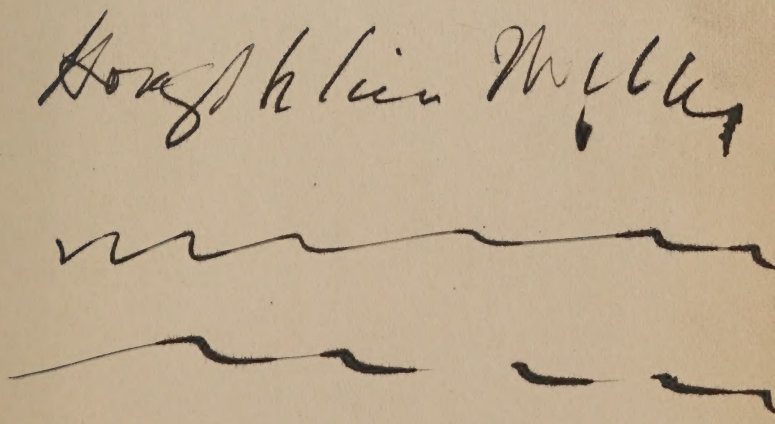

Children of the Wind

A Novel

BY

DORIS PEEL

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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THIS BOOK IS FOR

MOTHER

WHO UNDERSTANDS

"The wind bloweth where it listeth,
and thou hearest the sound thereof,
but canst not tell whence it cometh,
and whither it goeth."

JESUS

Children of the Wind

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE day of Mrs. Landor's garden-party was quite perfect from the first wisp of a beginning. It opened with a wide, pale sky and a white moon traced thinly in the west, and a little later there were billows and billows of coral and primrose, and by mid-morning the whole world seemed radiant and heavy with gold.

'A trifle warm . . .' suggested Mr. Landor.

'Oh, *no*, dear,' reproved Mrs. Landor. A trifle warm, indeed! It was quite perfect.

Mr. Landor withdrew his suggestion hurriedly as befitted one who had made an unfortunate mistake. 'Certainly, m'love!' He mopped his face and plodded through the afternoon with an air of studied enjoyment.

Mrs. Landor's garden-parties were always very charming, always very successful. She had a certain *flair* for them, other ladies were wont to remark — envy politely glossed over with admiration. Somehow she could catch just the right note of leisurely gayety, so elusive, and yet so essential. And then, of course, there were the refreshments. It was whispered that she made them herself: the little frosted orange cakes the color of ripe apricots, and the golden cheese wafers, and the cherry tarts sprayed with sweet cocoanut, and the water-cress sandwiches that never became moist or wilted . . .

Perhaps she did — and perhaps she didn't. At times Mrs. Landor was blandly inscrutable!

On this sixth day of August everything was swinging ahead with the regularity and smoothness of a well-organized band. The wide lawn, walled with shrubbery, sloped away into the rock-garden with its shallow stone steps and creeping baby's breath and the white and pink shells which Mrs. Landor had so energetically collected on a brief visit to the sea. (The biggest ones, all creamy flutes outside and shining rose within, she kept on the parlor mantelpiece for decorative purposes and for the amusement of her seven little nieces who used them, more or less indiscriminately, for boats and houses and dishes and hills in a game of vast pretense.)

Against the shrubbery flamed tiger-lilies like spurts of orange fire, and purple-blue phlox, and dahlias in every shade from bronze and copper and buff to scarlet and honey-yellow. Little green tables with spidery legs, and little green chairs that had to be sat in squarely to be prevented from tipping, studded the whole of the rolling lawn; and over by the laburnum bushes, under a white-and-cherry-striped awning, the orchestra (only five pieces, but very sprightly and with *such* a handsome violinist) was playing graceful, familiar airs which rose faintly above the chattering like a high, wavering wind.

There was a great deal of chattering, about this and that — the latest triumph of Madam Nordica; the possible return of chignons and waterfalls ('Oh, my dear, do you *really* think so! I look such a fright . . . the shape of one's head, I think, don't you? . . . '); Hall Caine's new book ('So touching, darling, I cried and cried. Yes, *really!* . . .'); the bicycle craze, the new flowing draperies . . . A hundred little threads of life, pleasant, inconsequential.

Mrs. Landor's guests drifted leisurely about among the small green tables like the slow, constant eddy of a colored pool. There were tall, willowy ladies and short, stubby ladies, in flowered batistes, in ciel-blue faille, in pale rose-flushed taffeta flounced and foaming with lace; ladies with enor-

mous box-sleeves and flaring skirts, with little chiffon-ruffled parasols like scalloped flowers, and the new silk and tulle bonnets set off with pert velvet bows. There were gowns of pink and cream and mauve and apricot, ruffled and buckled and pleated and fringed and embroidered. Against all their voluminous splendor the gentlemen were but streaks of somberness. . . .

Nellie Pettingil slipped out of the whirl of lace and chattering and flopped into a secluded seat with a sigh of relief. She rubbed her feet together and said 'Ouch!' very softly. The new shoes — white kid with tiny square buckles — were darling. (Mary had remarked upon them no less than four times!) But they *did* pinch, there was no getting away from that.

She stretched them out in front of her with a frankly complacent air. Nice trim little feet — and nice trim little shoes! Ankles, too, very slender and silken — only ankles were rather more private. She ran her fingers along the crisp freshness of her frock. It was new, of course; apple-green crepon sprayed with pink poppies, and with a vest of fine-tucked cream mull which framed the whiteness and softness of Nellie Pettingil's throat most becomingly. . . .

She tilted back her head in the warm flow of sunshine. How lovely it all was: new shoes, a new frock, and a hat almost new! How wonderfully lovely to be at a party with people laughing and chattering in high, gay voices, with music streaming from under a brightly striped awning, sunshine, sparkle, and a crisp new frock that suited you . . . Oh, very well!

She wiggled her toes to ease the cramped feeling, the poppy-sprayed skirt lifted a little.

It was then that Winnie Landor appeared, piloting Roger Blythe about with nervous elation.

'Mercy!' exclaimed Winnie, fanning herself with a good deal of energy. 'I've been looking for you everywhere, dar-

ling, simply everywhere!' Her tone implied that she had scoured the earth.

Nellie dropped her feet hastily into place, her larkspur-blue eyes lifted to Roger Blythe . . .

Winnie introduced them. Winnie loved introducing people — for some inexplicable reason it always made her feel important. 'Darling, Mr. Blythe — I mean, Miss Pettingil, Nellie darling — Mr. Blythe!' (A trifle muddled as usual.) Her long nose was working with excitement like a rabbit's. After all, it wasn't every day that one was called upon to present to one's best friend a famous and handsome (or *almost* handsome) radical editor, lauded and maligned in varying degrees from one end of the country to the other! (Winnie was, unfortunately, given to gross exaggeration.) 'He's an editor, darling!' she imparted in a loud aside.

Nellie inclined her head very gracefully, a sort of downward and upward swoop which she had perfected after long and arduous practice before Aunt Harriet's oval mirror. She looked very cool and trim and serene — and she was wondering if she ought to stand up to greet an editor.

'Such a *sweet* day!' observed Winnie breathlessly. 'Mamma did so hope it wouldn't rain. Aren't you glad it didn't rain, darling?'

'Oh, yes,' said Nellie.

Roger Blythe turned to her, politeness barely veiling boredom. 'You have appropriated the most charming spot in the garden, Miss Pettingil; I hope you don't mind our sharing it with you?'

'Mercy, no!' And then, as an after-thought: 'It isn't *my* garden, you know.' (All Nellie's after-thoughts were cast in the explanatory mould.)

Winnie's roaming eye caught sight of some one across the lawn by the gay splash of awning. 'Gracious! Mamma's beckoning to me,' in a palpitating tone. 'What do you sup-

pose she wants, darling?' with an air of great anxiety. 'I do wonder what she wants . . .'

'Perhaps,' suggested Mr. Blythe, 'you had better go and see.'

'Well, now, perhaps I had. There, she *is* beckoning me! You don't mind, darling . . . you quite understand . . .' With one vast, final flutter she darted across the lawn, her violet taffeta rustling and shuffling like a scurry of dried leaves.

Roger gave the remotest sigh of relief and seated himself. 'How sweet the sudden calm,' he murmured.

Nellie looked at him through drooping black lashes, a little awe-struck, but quite at ease. He was tall and slouchy with an odd, crooked smile, half-whimsical and half-bitter. It was a smile that Nellie couldn't understand. There were so many funny little things that Nellie couldn't understand!

Across the wide lawn people wandered about leisurely and aimlessly, the rose and lavender and saffron of swishing gowns making blurs of color against the sweep of green-gold. Winnie, released from her mamma, and Mary, flushed and lovely, had disappeared into the rock-garden. And now Edgar Potter and the tubby Mr. Picklebaum were edging casually over in the same direction. In the rock-garden it was very quiet . . . and secluded . . .

Beyond the edge of the eddying pool, Roger Blythe leaned forward a little, hands in pockets. And Nellie Pettingil, sitting straight and demure in her apple-green gown with sunshine and flowery breezes all about her, became suddenly aware of a long silence — a rather lovely silence.

She glanced up and her clear, larkspur-blue eyes met Roger Blythe's. He smiled, that odd, crooked smile of his, and suddenly the flowery breezes blew through and through Nellie Pettingil until she felt like a swaying blossom, like a flying bubble, high, very high in the sky, and full of nothing but light.

2

Aunt Harriet and Nellie Pettingil and Mr. Roger Blythe were walking home from Mrs. Landor's garden-party in the late of the afternoon.

'It's so near,' explained Aunt Harriet a trifle heavily. (*There*, she had gone and eaten too much again; she was wedged quite full of frosted orange cakes and cress sandwiches. She did hope that little worn place in her corset string wouldn't give out suddenly.) 'So near,' she repeated, drawing in her breath to aid the corset string, 'and really not worth while using the carriage, do you think so?' (*There*, her breath was out again with a pop — how provoking!) 'And little walks, especially in the summer, are so nice, don't you think so? Splendid exercise and most helpful for the appetite, *don't* you think so?'

Mercy, what was the matter with them; why didn't they perk up and answer a person! It wasn't comfortable to have to create all the conversation just after one had eaten too heavily. She wished this Mr. Blythe (a nice man, but still, a *man*) wasn't with them. Then they could get behind a tree and Nellie could thump her back. *That* always helped! She trusted that she wouldn't break out into hiccoughs before they reached home and the sugar bowl. Aunt Harriet had great faith in the efficacy of sugar. She sucked it for everything, lots of it, little pyramids of glistening white squares. 'You'll ruin your figure, dear,' Mrs. Potter would remark apprehensively. But Aunt Harriet was obstinate. She would rather have her sugar than her figure.

'A lovely day,' she observed without enthusiasm. 'Don't you think so?' She nudged Nellie's soft, creamy arm with the carved handle of her parasol. 'Talk, dearie,' she encouraged.

Nellie looked up and flushed very pink under the green shadow of her hat. 'Oh, a lovely day,' she said in a trilling, breathless voice. 'A lovely day . . .'

Wavering breezes, cool channels for the thousand fragrances of a thousand summer flowers; nothing anywhere in all her world but sunshine and garden-sweetness. 'Oh, a lovely day . . .'

Aunt Harriet began to puff a little, her large, flat face purpled and moistened with the heat.

That night Nellie Pettingil lay very still in her narrow white bed. Outside, over the tousled heads of the maples, floated the misty silver of a swollen moon. The muslin curtains foamed dimly about the window holding the night and the star-spangled sky as a picture, an old and most lovely picture.

Nellie Pettingil lay very still. She felt light and empty as a bubble floating with the moon, empty and yet full of wonder. 'I have fallen in love,' she thought tremulously, and all her thoughts went singing and wandering away.

How lovely life is! mused Nellie Pettingil. How beautiful and smooth and uncomplicated! One fell in love, one married, one had babies; all perfectly orderly and pleasant. A neat little plan — Life! She was dimly aware that occasionally the plan went awry; that occasionally things were hurt and broken and crushed. But that must be because, as in the poem they learned at Miss Randolph's School, 'some one had blundered.' If one didn't meddle, didn't interfere with the scheme, everything would go along calmly and logically. Just drifting down a wide stream, a pleasant stream, that was all.

Nellie Pettingil was not really surprised — she had always known that it would happen some time. It was what one grew for, what one lived for! 'I am in love.' And all the silver-fretted night was full of singing thoughts.

Roger Blythe heard them too; Roger Blythe, who found the world such a muddled, foolish place, heard singing thoughts in the night.

3

NELLIE and Roger Blythe were married at the end of October upon a day of tranquil skies and long, cool winds.

It was Roger who carried it all through with such breathless and bewildering haste. Nellie held back; she didn't like being hurried. She wanted to wait a while, to loiter in this sweet prelude knowing that the future was all planned and provided for. She wanted to extract every little bit of happiness from this first stage before she passed on to the second. It was the natural thing to do. In life one should move leisurely, pleasantly, so that there were no sudden jolts and jars, but only a careful blending of one experience into another. That was how it should go; and it was much wiser, much more satisfying to follow the normal course in this, as in all other things.

'Let's wait until some time in the spring,' she suggested. 'June, perhaps, with the roses. It's such a sweet month, dear, and more — well, more appropriate.'

Roger laughed, such a clear and careless laugh. 'But why?' he asked. 'Why wait? You love me now, don't you?'

'Oh, yes,' said Nellie Pettingil in a shining voice. 'Oh, yes, Roger.'

And for a moment the dim, old garden was full of singing thoughts.

Aunt Harriet was the first to be told. (That was duty.) And Winnie Landor was the second. (That was pleasure.)

Winnie was overcome with astonishment and rapture. 'Darling!' she shrilled, hugging Nellie fervently. 'How perfectly marvelous, and him so famous and an editor and all! Oh, darling! . . .' she collapsed into excited panting. It was evident that she considered Nellie tremendously clever to have acquired so singular and imposing a fiancé. Then suddenly dismay seized her — Winnie was subject to these spurts of emotion.

'You'll forget all about me!' she predicted woefully. 'You'll be so taken up with him that you won't even think of me!'

'Why, Winnie!' exclaimed Nellie with proper indignation. 'You know, dearest, you know that I'll never, *never* . . .'

Winnie hugged her impulsively. 'Oh, I do, I do!' she declared with feeling. Then she wept.

After that the days, the hours, the minutes all fled away swiftly. Even moments became of great value and importance. They were like bells, little silver bells, chiming time off into happy and precious fragments. There was so much to do that whenever Nellie stopped to think of it she was swallowed up in a sea of hopelessness. There was the trousseau first and above all. 'It will never be ready,' she decided with a bewildered little flutter of her white hands.

'Well, why on earth should it be?' asked Roger, who, apparently, couldn't quite understand the vast importance of a trousseau.

But, 'Of course it will,' declared Winnie, who was seldom, if ever, daunted. She and Nellie and Mrs. Cripp the dressmaker (expensive but obliging) sewed constantly and with a swiftness born of necessity. They would sit in the back room on the slippery horsehair sofa with organdy and taffeta and silk and mull billowing about them like sunset clouds. They would laugh and chat and plan with their mouths full of pins and their fingers flying . . .

'And she gave them back to him — although I'm sure I don't know why — and Mary thinks — dearest, the velvet sash, no, *there*, by the ribbon-box . . .'

'Edgar *feels* it, I think, don't you, dear? He's so sensitive — Oh, my needle; under the leg, darling . . . no, the chair leg, not Mrs. Cripp's . . . Oh, Mrs. Cripp! I'm so sorry; I didn't *mean* that, of course. *There*, thank you *so* much . . .'

Sometimes Aunt Harriet would assist them, but as she had a weakness for putting things on backwards or up-side-down

and for mixing laces and buttons and dropping sugar crumbs in the mull puffs, as a rule she merely sat on the sidelines and encouraged them with forced optimism.

Fortunately the long, low cedar chest under the window in Nellie's room had been something more than half full even before the garden party in early August. ('Which just shows,' remarked Winnie as she basted a hem, 'that it *does* pay to be prepared — and now where's the green silk thread, darling?')

By the twenty-first of the month they had, quite miraculously, finished up everything of vital importance. Besides the chest full of carefully folded garments, all lace-edged and scalloped and tucked and frilled, there was now hanging in the cool dimness of the deep closet a row of new frocks, very fresh and lovely. There was a rose-pink bengaline with the long, flowing draperies so fashionable at the moment; and a cashmere trimmed with marabout; and a blue porcelain wool ('To match your eyes, darling,' as Winnie observed) bordered with rows of mohair braid; and a fragile cream silk flounced with Valenciennes lace; and one of the latest frisé velvet mantles with chenille fringes and drops of jet; and lastly, set on the white hat-shelf with its paper-lace frill, a toque of green velvet with black quills and pompons. All very lovely, all very fresh in the cool dimness of the deep closet.

'They're just *ravishing!*' declared Winnie, tired but triumphant, after they had sewn the last tiny glazed button on the bengaline.

Nellie stood by the window in the flare of afternoon sunshine, her blond hair tousled into fluffiness, her eyes a shining, tranquil blue. 'I'm so happy,' she said breathlessly. 'Winnie, dear, I'm so happy.'

And Winnie hugged her excitedly and wept.

October the twenty-fourth was a day of serene gold with

an empty, cloudless sky. 'Perfect weather,' every one said. Aunt Harriet said it. Winnie said it. The guests all said it. After a while it became a veritable pæan: 'Perfect weather!'

The wedding was held at a little church, ash-gray and laced about with ivy, not far from the Pettingil home.

Nellie had stood firm and fast for her church wedding. Roger wanted something unpretentious, without crowds, without the whirling fuss of a social affair.

'Let's just slip away quietly,' he said. 'Please, Nellie-girl. We don't want people slobbering over us — one of these damned shows!'

Nellie's fringed blue eyes filled with tears. 'But I *do*,' she faltered. 'Roger, dear, I do . . . people and flowers and music, I *want* them!'

'But why?' asked Roger, almost sharply.

Nellie looked up at him, half-surprised, her lashes curling back damply over white lids. 'It's the way people always get married,' she answered simply. She might have been reminding him that the moon rose with night, the snow came with winter.

Roger was silent a moment. And then, 'Very well,' he said shortly as if he were agreeing to play a game that he had long ago out-grown.

It was four o'clock and the little ash-gray church was dim and fragrant with white flowers. The mellow light of the closing afternoon slanted through the high arched windows at the side. It picked out the center aisle with pale gold — it made a long, slim path between the darkness of the pews.

As Nellie started out along the path she looked to the end for a moment, and smiled. Roger was up there, at the end . . . She walked slowly along the aisle, a little white figure, rather lovely, very serene, with pale sunlight drifting over the mist of tulle veil.

Winnie, preceding with the other bridesmaids, was awed

and ecstatic and in an agony of fear lest she should do something horrible to spoil darling Nellie's wedding. She was seized with the awful thought of stumbling suddenly and falling full length in the aisle, thus halting the entire beautiful procession and perhaps tripping up Mary, or even Nellie herself! What on earth should she do if it really happened? She would simply perish of mortification, what with the audience and Mr. Picklebaum and Roger an editor and all! She would perish — no doubt about that. Winnie stepped along cautiously, breathing hard . . .

Nellie was smiling tranquilly, full of a great happiness, her blue eyes wide like twin flowers, and shining like dewed flowers at dawn. It seemed a very long way to the end of the sunny path; a lovely, fragrant way of white flowers. The music was swelling now; it throbbed above them, about them; there seemed almost too much music for the little church to hold.

Outside, the street grew a little shadowy, grayness sifting through warm gold. The light from the high arched windows at the side was strained thinner and thinner through the sieve of approaching dusk. The polished pews — the white flowers, gleamed fainter . . .

And at the head of the little church Nellie Pettingil was promising to love, honor, and obey in a high, clear voice. She meant it; she meant it more than anything else in all the world. At that moment all life resolved itself into the one desire to love, honor, and obey Roger Blythe. Nothing else mattered, nothing else was.

(Some women in the dimness of the pews cried gently, unobtrusively, the dust of broken dreams lying in their eyes.)

But Roger, standing tall and motionless, seemed strangely detached from the fashionable, interested guests, the flowers, the music, all the careful little details. There was a look on his face half-scornful, half-tired. He might have been waiting for them to be through with an elaborate, slightly foolish game.

CHAPTER TWO

I

THE winter slipped away into spring with unbelievable swiftness. Just a brief space of snows and frosty skies, and then once more the damp pungency of brown earth and crushed, sodden leaves steaming a little in the first heat of the sun.

Nellie Blythe, looking out of the dining-room window while she brushed the crumbs off the table with a blue enamel scoop (Mary's wedding present) into a white plate rimmed with roses (part of Aunt Harriet's wedding present), would smile to herself, a serene smile born of nothing in particular. Just outside a clump of huddled lilac bushes were swelling into green; tiny heart-shaped leaves of the palest jade. And in a little while there would be flowers, whole masses of them — lavender and white, very sweet and lovely. It would be nice to have lilacs outside the window, surging up against the pane, nodding in between looped-back curtains. . . .

She must change Roger's chair around so that he would be able to see them. Roger loved lilacs.

Spring! — Spring! What a pretty word it was; like a song. Sometimes in the morning, when she was going about the house, mopping, tidying up, doing this and that, Nellie would hum it to herself, over and over. Spring — spring — time of daffodils — time of lilac. She hummed a lot in these early days of May. Little songs seemed to have been let loose in her; they bubbled up and spilled over into the quietness of the morning hours. They were vagrant and soft and purring; they came and went, and she scarcely knew it.

Nellie was happy, completely and finally happy; and also she was very busy. Happy and busy — but mostly happy.

Twice a week a nondescript, extraordinarily efficient individual known as 'The Girl,' came in and took full charge of the Blythe household. She seized upon it grimly, and beat and shook and pounded and scrubbed and banged the place until it shone with meek submission. She was a wistful and negative soul who seemed to find her one expression in crashing a house into order.

Nellie was always very polite and gracious to The Girl. As soon as she arrived, she would have an interview with her, talking very briskly and confidently, making slightly muddled plans for the day's work, and issuing a score of vague and contradictory orders. The Girl listened passively and, upon being released, would proceed to do what she pleased in a manner congenial to her taste.

Nellie was dimly aware that the things which she said during the interview were of remarkably little importance. But of course one had to have interviews, if it were only to make the proper impression. One had to keep up appearances, as Aunt Harriet observed. It was *natural.*

At first, in those early weeks of November, keeping house had been a bewildering, almost alarming business. After Roger left in the morning, Nellie would stand in the middle of the white-and-buff kitchen, her arms hanging helplessly at her side. What did one do — and how did one do it? Dishes, beds, cleaning, marketing, meals — they all confronted her in a terrifying fashion: a tremendous field of tasks to be ploughed through somehow.

Aunt Harriet had come over frequently (and still did) to give her detailed and earnest advice. But Aunt Harriet's advice was of the ornate, theoretical kind which she never practiced herself, but kept on hand for the benevolent purpose of impressing credulous souls in need of counsel. Nellie listened politely, and nodded and agreed and tried very hard afterwards to remember what it had all been about.

Winnie, however, by sheer force of perseverance, had made herself invaluable. She ransacked every book and magazine and pamphlet she could lay her hands on in search of recipes and general household hints. In time she accumulated a vast mass of information, all of which was dutifully brought to Nellie in the manner of an energetic terrier laying bones at his master's feet.

She acquired the habit of bursting into the house, breathless and jubilant, at all hours of the day and evening. 'Darling,' she would announce, plopping herself into a chair and beginning to rock back and forth with business-like animation, 'if you'll scatter damp tea-leaves over the rugs before sweeping, you won't have any dust — just imagine! And always boil a sprig of mint with new peas, it makes them twice as tasty. And here's another way to fix shrimps; I cut it out of a magazine in the library, but I don't suppose they'll mind. A-la-something-or-other. It's French, I guess. And Mamma sent this — it's for pickles, sweet ones like we had the other night. And, dearest, I almost forgot it! I was just going down the front steps when Mamma opened the door. "Winnie," she called, "you've forgotten this!" And, sure enough, I had. It was lying on the table in the hall, and she wouldn't even have noticed it, only . . .'

Winnie would rock and chat and give forth reams of recipes and hints that she had obtained by foul means or fair. Nellie couldn't remember very much of it; but occasionally she caught firmly onto a slip of advice. Like the tea-leaves! Nellie always scattered tea-leaves before sweeping!

But by spring Winnie's violent enthusiasm had dwindled considerably, and on a certain day she was seized with a sudden and erratic dislike for cookery books and articles on 'How to Remove Rust Stains' and 'How to Keep Onions from Smelling' and to 'Make Jellies Jell' and 'Avoid Lumps in Sauces.' Somehow, the whole subject became most distasteful, like flowers that have festered. And, besides, there

was something much more thrilling on hand now; something beside which the smell of onions assumed the meanest of proportions.

Winnie began to hunt for patterns — long, tucked gowns with the tiniest sleeves, and bonnets, very frilly and fragile . . .

And by spring Nellie's first panic had given place to a calm conviction that, taking all things into consideration, she was really a very good manager. Not excellent, like Mrs. Landor, perhaps. But good, even very good. She would serve mediocre meals with a complacent dignity, and mop and dust and shop with the air of one who knows she is making a commendable job of it.

Roger, standing tall and careless in the kitchen doorway, while she spattered eggs about in an earnest attempt to make an omelet, would look amused. Somehow Roger found so many things at which to look amused. . . .

By July Nellie and Winnie were deep in another orgy of sewing. They usually sat in the garden by the lilac bushes, their laps filled with the finest of muslin and laces. They made a great many things.

'Too many, I'm afraid, dear,' Nellie observed.

'Oh, well,' remarked Winnie pleasantly, 'they probably won't be wasted. And, besides' — with a delicate lowering of voice — 'er — twins, you know, darling!'

Nellie looked startled. She had never thought of twins.

'Even — even triplets,' continued Winnie, who was rather fascinated by the idea. 'And — what-d'you-call them, quad-something . . . four, you know.'

Nellie looked acutely distressed. 'Dearest —' she quavered.

Winnie's bright air of expectancy was swallowed up in remorse. 'Oh, darling, I'm so sorry; I'm most awfully sorry, really and truly I am.' She blundered about with regret for

some moments, and then settled down to admiration. 'You're just wonderful, Nellie. I never saw any one so calm and brave. I don't see how you do it, really I don't!' She repeated this frequently in a never-varying tone of astonishment and benevolence.

Sometimes, when their sewing ardor palled, Winnie would read out of what she always called her 'favorite magazine.' 'Now, dearest, just lean back and rest and I'll read a little out of my favorite magazine.' It was a very up-to-date periodical. It had articles on 'The Attitude of Women toward Dumb Animals,' and 'Women and Watches,' and 'Women and Sport,' and (of course) the perennial 'New Woman.' It ran a variety of serials, all practically endless, which Winnie followed with intense interest. (Illustrated too; Winnie didn't care for stories that weren't illustrated.) Also it had an Etiquette Department (very ably conducted) wherein one might learn if it was proper to throw back one's veil in church on a hot day, or if it was permissible to run after a friend in the street, or if a young lady and a young gentleman (not engaged, but with encouraging prospects) might walk together — alone — after dark.

Besides this mass of enthralling information, there were scattered throughout the pages numerous tidbits on this person and that — so valuable for future conversations. 'Did you hear, dear, about . . . isn't it *terrible* . . . so did I and I hate to believe it, but . . . '

Winnie, settled comfortably back against the cushions with the sun falling across her straight brown hair and her long pink nose, read aloud in spurts. 'Turquoise blue is to be the most fashionable color for the fall, darling. I think it's sweet, don't you? Oh, here's something about that actress: "Madam Sarah Bernhardt is now forty-five years old." (Just imagine! you'd think she'd retire.) "It is said in London that she quite looks her age. On the stage her face is unpleasantly painted, although paint and powder

hide the wrinkles——" (Well, then, you really can't blame her, dear, can you?) "Yet this remarkable actress and woman still has a strong hold on popular favor and it is expected that her American engagement next year will be brilliantly successful."

'My gracious! Do you suppose she'll come here, Nellie? I'd love to see her, wouldn't you? Although I guess she does all her acting in Italian or something — I think they ought to make these foreigners learn English. Well, now, let me see . . .' A short silence while her eyes flitted back and forth. 'Oliver Wendell Holmes was seventy-six last Saturday — isn't that sweet!' Winnie liked to see people attain what she called 'a ripe old age.' It started somewhere at fifty and went on to ninety. After that, of course, it ceased to be ripe and became a trifle pathetic.

'Here's a picture of that Vanderbilt girl who married the Duke.' (Winnie said Duke with the same respect that she said Editor.) 'And listen: "The richest men in New York, headed by Mr. John Jacob Astor, are attempting to establish an aquarium there." What's an aquarium, darling?'

'Some sort of zoo, dear, I think,' ventured Nellie vaguely.

'Mercy! What a funny thing for rich men to get up! Well, um-um —' Another silence, and then, 'Oh!' in quite a different tone. 'Dear me! there's something most awfully dreadful here, darling. Just a minute . . .' Her eyes ran over it with a sort of gloating interest. 'It's shocking!' she declared breathlessly. And then, with an air of great secrecy, 'I mustn't read it to you, dearest, so don't ask me to. In your condition, you know — it's all about that train wreck — it wouldn't be right for you to hear it, really and truly! So don't ask me . . .' More skimming through the pages, more scraps of news and comment. . . .

Nellie didn't listen much. She rocked very gently, very contentedly, her larkspur-blue eyes drowsy and tranquil,

her hands, plump and soft and white, folded idly in a pile of fine muslin and lace.

2

BRYCE was born in late September on a rainy, wind-swept day thick with falling leaves.

Winnie came round as usual in the afternoon, very cold and squelchy, but with an air of large and determined cheer. ('Since darling Nellie, at *this* time, simply must have brightness about her!') She paused for a moment on the front porch with its tight network of vines, and shook her umbrella energetically at arm's length. Winnie was wearing one of the hats so very fashionable that fall: wide-brimmed, high-crowned, and loaded with a variety of trimmings. There were two jeweled buckles, a great deal of velvet, and a number of purple plumes — all very smart and dashing! Under its massive ornateness her face looked small and peaked and, at the present moment, astonishingly red. (Cold weather, especially *damp* cold weather, always went to Winnie's nose!)

She left the umbrella against the railing to drip itself dry; and then she assumed a very bright smile and entered the house.

After the windy bluster of the street, the hall seemed still — almost queerly still. Through the parlor doorway with its sweeping green curtains she caught sight of Aunt Harriet sitting stiff and erect, her long, ivory-colored fingers twisted together into an intricate knot.

'How do you do,' said Aunt Harriet in a small, thin voice. 'Won't you come in?'

Winnie advanced on tiptoe. 'Oh, dear!' she quavered. 'Is it — it isn't . . .'

Aunt Harriet started to say something, fumbling about a little with the words as if she didn't quite know how to place them. . . .

Winnie was tremendously impressed. She crept across the room and sat down with infinite care to avoid any creaking. Under the dashing hat with its buckles and velvet and plumes, her eyes had become suddenly frightened.

Outside the rain stung through the lilac bushes. It made quick, loud sounds like a hundred tiny shots going off very rapidly. It went on and on . . . sharp and clear. Rain stinging through lilac bushes.

Aunt Harriet and Winnie sat together in the parlor, very shaky and scared, while the light grew dimmer and dimmer. After a time Winnie began to cry in a loose, overwrought fashion. 'Oh, dear! Oh, dear!' she droned softly to no one in particular. 'Do you suppose it will be all right? Do you *really* suppose it will be all right? Oh, I do hope it will be . . . I *do* . . .'

Once, when it was nearing the end of the afternoon, Roger stalked suddenly through the doorway from the room across the hall.

'Can't you shut up?' he asked savagely. 'My God! Can't you shut up?' And then he turned and stalked away again.

Winnie was extremely upset. She had never had any one say 'My God!' at her before. She crumpled up miserably in a corner of the sofa and buried her face in the two fat satin cushions. 'My darling, darling Nellie!' she wailed. 'Oh, I do hope . . . I *do* . . . I *do* . . .'

The sharp dropping of rain bit into the silence, steadily, clearly, on and on. Tic-tac-tic. Aunt Harriet began to count the drops very carefully, with a peculiar absorption. She became mixed and felt unaccountably irritated; she started over again, frowning a little: tic-tac-tic . . .

The minutes stumbled along, dragging in twilight and evening, a rain-laced evening with high winds trudging in the trees. . . .

It was all over at last, and a long, thin wail that was

Bryce's trailed through the shadowy house. Winnie shot upright, her cheeks wet and creased, and her round eyes popping.

'It's come!' she announced in an awed voice. 'Oh, my goodness gracious! it's come!' And then she wept with relief.

Aunt Harriet, bit by bit, began to unfreeze, her fingers, her large, flat face . . .

And in the darkened room across the hall Roger Blythe sat down rather suddenly.

3

For Nellie the succeeding weeks were enchanting and utterly bewildering. When she awoke in the morning with the room swimming in yellow sunshine and the bronze and crimson maple fluttering outside the window like a gay banner, a queer, tremulous feeling would surge through her — a happiness fine and very fragile.

Beside the bed was Bryce's frilled and ribboned crib with all the lovely light of the early day sweeping over it. Such a beautiful day, and such a beautiful crib. . . . Nellie would lie very quiet in the stillness, thinking placid, dreamy, tidy little thoughts. How wonderful Bryce was — and yet how natural! Just one more step in the plan of Life, one more sweet and gracious unfoldment. Bryce, *their* Bryce! Now and then she spoke of him as 'God's precious gift to us.' But not very often. (Somehow, Nellie always felt a little embarrassed when she referred to God, as if He were a not quite delicate subject.)

Roger didn't seem to care much for babies. Roger was like that — very fine and wonderful, and yet, at times, queerly different from other people . . .

'It's because he's an Editor, darling,' Winnie explained with the remotest tinge of sympathy.

Nellie wondered vaguely if that were all — just his being an Editor! There were so many things about Roger that she couldn't understand, little things he said and did and looked. They stood out clearly like landmarks in the memory of the past year. . . .

That day, for instance, back in early June. There had been some trouble at the office, all focusing (as far as Nellie could gather) about a certain editorial the previous issue of the magazine had carried — something very rash and brave and troublesome! Roger had come home late in the evening with a white, indomitable look, and tiredness in his eyes.

Nellie heard the door slam and ran downstairs to meet him in a new blue muslin frock with a great deal of lace and cherry ribbons and a spray of pink flowers from the garden tucked in her sash. 'You're late, dear,' she said with the barest hint of reproval. The wavering yellow from the lamp flowed over her golden hair and soft, round throat, and over the crisp freshness of the flounced blue frock. She was cool and fragrant and very serene, a little gold-and-white lady standing gracefully in the bland light of the lamp.

Roger was silent a moment, slouched forward in that old manner of his; and then he suddenly gathered Nellie into his arms with a tired, half-hungry gesture. 'You're so quiet,' he said in a low, rather husky voice, 'so peaceful, Nellie-girl . . .' And at that moment he seemed to be asking for quietness and asking for peace.

A great joy had surged through Nellie Blythe, fine and sweet and tremulous; and yet even then, with her cheek pressed against the familiar roughness of Roger's coat, she dimly sensed something that she could not understand.

There were other things, too; things that belonged to Roger — the magazine, his queer, brilliant friends (who always made Winnie giggle), and that smile of his, half-whimsical, half-bitter, and altogether secret.

Nellie had never been able to understand the magazine.

It was violent and harsh and enormously clever, and had to do with all manner of bewildering and complicated affairs rather crusty for one nurtured principally upon the sloppy food of Winnie Landor's 'favorite periodical.' But it was close to Roger, she knew that, a vital and living part of him, something into which he poured all the labor of his days and all the fire of his heart. 'It is his work,' said Nellie, and felt a little awed that he should have so much of himself to give to it.

One afternoon she took several numbers of the magazine out into the garden and read them all through very slowly and earnestly. She even kept a dictionary beside her wherein to look up the words she didn't know, and a little notebook in which to jot down any stray thoughts the articles might inspire which would show Roger what an intelligent interest she was taking in his work, and would please him, perhaps . . .

In the back of one of the issues she came across several newspaper clippings and two or three folded letters. The first clipping was quite dreadful. It called Roger all sorts of shocking names, and declared the magazine to be a menace to something-or-other and a disgrace to something else, and ended up in a great splutter of indignation. 'Oh, dear, dear!' said Nellie, quite distressed. It seemed incredible that any one should be allowed to write such disrespectful things about Roger and his work. 'Dear, dear, dear!' repeated Nellie in the little clucking voice she reserved for incredible matters.

She skimmed through one of the letters without any thought of trespassing on private property. It was rather lengthy and involved, but very much kinder than the clipping: 'Dear Sir: I feel compelled to write to you in reference to the views you expressed recently under the heading of "Battle-cries of Hypocrisy." I am aware that this article has met with bitter and condemnatory replies from a con-

siderable number of people, but I for one — without agreeing with your conclusions in their entirety — should like to express my appreciation for the courage and honesty with which you have approached this and other subjects of equal importance. I can only wish, sir, that this courage might be tempered, somewhat, with respect — or, at least, consideration — for certain things which some of us have been educated to consider as essential to right living. In many instances we have accepted these conventions — if you wish to consider them as such — because we feel that they guide rather than hamper our experiences, and because ——' Nellie slipped over the pages to the close at the end of the fourth: 'Believe me, dear sir, respectfully yours, E. William Blair.' That sounded very much nicer. She must remember to speak to Roger about it — one always spoke of the pleasant things.

She gathered together the magazines and held them for a moment, her eyes a little tired with so much reading. It had been a full afternoon's task — the shadow of the maple tree had swung around before her, printing the hours on the golden lawn. And yet, in spite of her thorough endeavors, she was really no closer to Roger's work, no closer to the fire that burned in his heart . . .

It seemed incredible to Nellie that there should be so many things in the world which needed destroying. Somehow she never noticed them. Was life really like that — full of juts and mazes and rottenness? She wondered a little, but it was only a surface wondering. Underneath was a calm and placid conviction that life was something very sweet and pleasant, and very satisfying. Now and then it brought to her sudden rushes of breathless joy, almost frightening in their intensity. They came when Roger smiled at her, and said little things, little lovely things . . . But mostly it was just a quiet happiness, steady and full of peace like a great river swelling into fulfillment.

CHAPTER THREE

I

JUSTINE was born at the close of a stormy day, with cold winds snapping about the house like long, stinging whips. Nellie could hear them as she lay inside — March winds troubling the trees and the sky . . . 'Blowy,' she murmured. And Roger, listening, with quiet eyes, to the strange, torn words of spring, nodded and stroked her hand . . .

During the early years of the new century, Nellie was seriously engaged in an occupation which she referred to (with a complacent little flourish before spinsters) as 'training the dear children.' This consisted chiefly in saying, 'Now, pet, now!' in a reproachful tone, and in smothering up awkward queries with little blankets of vague semi-truths, and in emphasizing the sundry blessings to be derived from implicit obedience, and finishing up one's crusts, and blowing one's nose when necessary, and conducting one's self with proper restraint before members of a large but hazily defined body of persons known as 'Grown-ups.' 'Kind but firm!' was her little watchword. She had read it somewhere in Winnie Landor's favorite magazine.

Winnie herself considered both the training and the babies exceedingly remarkable. She expatiated upon them, affectionately but inaccurately, to any available audience — elderly young ladies who thirstily lapped up nursery details, stray gentlemen who were bored and occasionally embarrassed, Mrs. Pooterwell who had nine sons and three daughters to her credit, Mary, Mr. Picklebaum . . . (Winnie was now definitely 'going out' with Mr. Picklebaum after several years of advance and retreat on his part. She called him 'Picky' and patted him a great deal on his chubby cheek with a rather brittle coyness. 'Oh, Picky, you naughty

thing! Did you hear *that*, Nellie, dearest? . . . *really*, Picky! . . .' And then would come the pats.)

She was constantly plunged into the deepest admiration for Nellie's capabilities: 'You are just wonderful with them, darling; I don't see how you do it, really I don't. If only poor dear Aunt Harriet could watch you training them . . .' her voice would trail off, delicately shaded with grief; and Nellie's larkspur-blue eyes would fill with tears. Poor dear Aunt Harriet had never seen Justine.

Bryce was getting on for six now, happy-go-lucky, whimsical, selfish, with a strange little-boy passion for collecting worms and beetles and butterflies, and letting them all loose in some unfortunate spot. Nellie sat on them one day, and when she discovered what had happened began to cry hysterically. (Nellie never could stand a mess!)

Bryce was very frightened and stricken with remorse. 'Mamma!' he shrieked, patting her arm excitedly, 'I'm sorry, Mamma, I'm sorry . . . please don't cry, I'm sorry . . .'

Nellie rocked back and forth and said 'Oo-oo!' in a long, shuddering voice. She might have been a little girl suddenly confronted with a dead kitten.

Bryce tugged at her skirt, his face crimson with alarm. 'I'm sorry, Mamma, I'm sorry . . . I'll wipe them up . . . I'm sorry . . .'

Afterwards, very tearful and upset, he promised Roger never to do it again. And he never did. (That was one of the things Winnie considered so remarkable!)

Justine was much less amenable to the 'training.' Tears, which were Nellie's final appeal, only seemed to amuse her; and cajoleries which would have captivated Bryce were stared through blankly. 'I wish,' Nellie would think with a little flutter of helplessness, 'I do wish that she wouldn't laugh so much; if she would only be more *calm*, I am sure I should be able to manage her better.' But Justine seemed

to have only two moods: one of rage and turbulence and loud crying, and one of laughter. She was like a pendulum, swinging back and forth, never still . . .

Nellie found her very perplexing, rather disturbing — but Roger loved her best of all. When she shouted and gurgled, her eyes crinkled into gray-green slits, he would smile back with a quietness that held understanding. Sometimes, when they were alone together, he would encourage her, half-musingly, as if his thoughts were wandering softly over the borderline into words: 'I shouldn't be surprised, infant, if you had the right idea. Laugh at them, keep on laughing at them, and then perhaps — perhaps you won't get hurt . . .'

'Roger' was the first word Justine ever said. It came out quite suddenly one evening like the pop of a toy balloon. 'Roger!' said Justine clearly.

Nellie swept round, startled. 'Oh, you sweet darling! Did you hear her, dear? Just as *plain* ——'

'Roger,' repeated Justine with the air of one who has made a pleasant discovery.

'No, no, lamb. *Papa!* Baby say *Papa.*'

Justine stared at her blandly. 'Roger,' she persisted; and then her eyes crinkled up and she began to shout it with cheerful gusto: 'Roger — Roger — Roger ——'

Nellie was distressed. 'Dear, please tell her to stop; she mustn't get in the habit, you know. Whatever would people think . . . ?'

Roger strolled over casually and looked down at his daughter. He was silent a moment, and then, 'Why not?' he asked. 'Why not? She seems to have made up her mind — Roger let it be.' And in the warm flutter of firelight he smiled — smiled for Justine.

Nellie was astonished and perplexed; but Nellie had promised to obey!

The next spring, just after the completion of Bryce's first

term at school, Winnie Landor did the spectacular and unexpected by jilting Mr. Picklebaum with his chubby pink cheeks and dimpled hands, and marrying an incredibly beautiful but incredibly silly young man by the name of Hector B. Earl. It was love at first sight (or, at any rate, no later than second), thus satisfying an old and secret yearning of Winnie's. The affair with Mr. Picklebaum had come on so gradually that she had, in her heart, always remained just a little doubtful of its genuineness. She was sorry, of course, for poor Picky, but 'I must be honest with myself, Nellie, darling; you see that, don't you?'

After a little persuasion Nellie saw it perfectly, and she thought Mr. Earl very pretty. To Winnie he was Lancelot, Romeo, what-you-will, all rolled into one glorious whole! He had an exquisite profile, simply exquisite, and he was not embarrassingly brilliant like dear Nellie's Roger. He was cheerful and honest and pleasantly conceited. Furthermore, he was addicted to spells of giggling, peculiarly empty and feminine; but Winnie, never very discerning, considered these indicative of a great sense of humor. (Winnie was singularly gifted in her capacity to misconstrue the obvious.)

After their wedding, which took place in a romantic hurry, they left for the town of Aldington in the north of the State from whence Hector had swept down Lochinvar-fashion and captured his love.

At the last moment Winnie was stricken with grief at leaving her home, her Mamma, her Nellie, and 'all the dear, dear memories' — which was a little mixed but very sincere. At the station she made reckless and tear-fretted promises. 'Nellie, darling, I'm coming back every month for a visit. Really and truly, dearest! Hector's so sweet he'll understand perfectly . . . he'll just *love* me to come. We won't be parted for long, darling — just little bits of whiles . . .' and so on, in an excited flurry, with her long nose pink-tipped and working like a rabbit's.

When it was all over and the train had sped straight as an arrow off to the north, Nellie felt a sudden and surprising jolt, as if a pillow, to which she had grown very accustomed, had quietly been removed.

2

EVENING after evening Nellie's children amused themselves with a peculiar but all-absorbing game which was conducted with the utmost secrecy and silence. Since they remained glumly unresponsive to all inquiries, Nellie was unable to discover wherein lay its singular fascination. As far as could be gathered, the whole thing consisted of shutting the doors leading into the hallway, turning off the light, and then creeping about in mysterious and apparently aimless circles. If a door was opened suddenly, Justine and Bryce would set up a mighty howl of wrath — especially Justine, who fiercely resented any intrusion. 'Shut it up . . . quick . . . *quick!* . . .' they would shout, banging their hands on the floor. It all sounded very peremptory and urgent as if something invaluable were at stake. (As a matter of fact, something was — the wonderful, fleeting magic of a self-made game!)

To Nellie it seemed altogether too odd to be desirable. Creeping about in the dark — whoever heard of such a thing! 'It's so *queer*,' she would remark a little plaintively. 'How can they get fun out of it, dear? Why do they do it?'

Roger shrugged his shoulders. 'It's their business; if they want to do it, why not let them!' (Roger was like that: he seemed rarely to interfere with individuals, although he spent all his life interfering violently with the world at large.)

And so, day in and day out, Justine and Bryce went through supper with impatient wriggles and a good deal of confidential giggling, until, at a nod from Roger, they were free to tear into the hall, slamming the doors after them.

And then the game began! The general idea was to keep

moving in the thrilling darkness, but upon no account to bump into one another. Its very monotony assumed a sort of enchantment in the black silence. You might have been anywhere, doing anything! You went round and round over the carpeted floor, past the elaborate-legged hall-table, past the smooth, rounded umbrella-stand, past the lanky hat-rack with its thin, brass arms stretching upward. You couldn't make the tiniest noise or shuffle; you could hardly breathe! Just round and round in wonderful, magic circles . . .

One January evening after supper Nellie was seated in the warm brightness of the parlor, writing her weekly letter to Winnie Earl. The house was very quiet and peaceful with firelight flickering over the drawn curtains and over the plump satin cushions and shiny, curve-backed sofa, which always looked just a trifle too polished and slippery to be entirely comfortable. Roger was not home yet. He had been detained at the office again. (Nellie was beginning to think of the office in terms of polite animosity!) And the children were playing their game as usual — the funny little dears.

Nellie's pen flowed smoothly and evenly over the lilac-tinted paper. One, two, three pages, never pausing, never faltering . . . '. . . Darling, I am *so* glad, I just can't tell you *how* glad! I think it's perfectly wonderful, and you did want a girl, didn't you? And Valerie-Maud is such a beautiful name, and so original. You are always so original, Winnie! I was just saying to Mary the other day, "Winnie is so *different*." I meant it in the *nice* way, of course, dear . . .'

The front door opened and closed again, and there were sudden shrieks and commands to 'Go away!' from Justine and Bryce. Then came Roger's voice, drawling and amused . . . 'Hello, Indians! How goes the grand parade?' 'Oh, it's Roger,' from Justine in an entirely different tone.

Nellie looked up for a moment and smiled. Slippers and chair ready beside the fire — very domestic, very comfort-

able. She returned to the letter, writing a little more rapidly . . .

Justine's voice again with a new note of eagerness: 'Say, Roger ——' Then a subdued whispering. 'Oh, please, please . . .' from Bryce, and Justine a little higher: 'Yes, yes! Say yes, Roger, *please* . . .' very coaxing and excited. And Roger's laugh, soft and suddenly careless. Then silence once more.

Nellie wrote on, the pen gripped firmly in her plump, white fingers, the light wavering over her shining hair and flushed, intent face. 'But somehow, dear, I can't quite see why she should have; I don't want to criticize, of course, but you do understand, don't you . . .' Dear Winnie! It was so easy and nice to write to her, so pleasant to know that everything you said she *would* understand and agree with and applaud. Dear Winnie!

Nellie signed her name with a careful little flourish, and then glanced up at the clock. Seven-thirty! and the children still playing! And Roger, too — whatever had happened to Roger? She hurried over to the door and opened it quickly . . .

A flood of golden light swept over the hall, over the elaborate-legged table and rounded umbrella-stand — and over the creeping figures of Justine and Bryce and Roger trailing after one another on hands and knees.

Nellie stood motionless in the doorway, her larkspur-blue eyes very wide. 'Oh!' she said blankly. 'Why — what is it, dear?'

Roger stood up rather suddenly.

'Go away!' shrieked Justine; 'you've spoiled it. Go away — tell her to go away, Roger ——'

Nellie's white hands made a little fluttering, helpless gesture.

'Tell her to go away!' stormed Justine. 'Make her go, Roger . . .'

But Roger Blythe had walked into his room across the hall, without saying a word, without giving another glance at Nellie standing bewildered in the doorway.

3

It was a few weeks after Justine's ninth birthday that Roger went on a camping-trip with some of his queer, brilliant friends. Every one said he looked tired, and advised him to go — especially Nellie.

'It will be so lovely out in the country, dear, with the birds and the trees. I don't know how it is, but Nature is somehow always so refreshing, I think, don't you?' (By 'Nature' Nellie meant maples and sparrows and buttercups, and even grass.) 'And when you come back you will be able to work twice as well; every one says you can after a vacation . . . Bryce, pet, can't you see Papa wants the sauce. Oh, *please*, dear! Are you quite, *quite* sure? All right, Bryce, pass it to Mamma . . .'

'Can I go?' Justine asked abruptly from across the table.

Roger laughed. 'It's to be a *vacation*, young lady, not a circus. Rest, you know — sprawled out under the trees and that sort of thing. Not at all your style.'

'Of course not, darling,' from Nellie in a serene, flowing voice.

Justine's green eyes crinkled up and she nudged Bryce with her elbow. 'Of cawse not, dawling,' she mimicked with a certain fatuous precision, her eyebrows raised into pained peaks.

Nellie, pouring coffee at the end of the table, flushed a little.

'That isn't funny, daughter,' remarked Roger quietly, almost casually.

Justine's pertness wilted in a flash. 'I'm sorry,' she said — but her apology was to Roger, not to Nellie.

It was a shining, splendid day when Roger left, a day with white-plumed clouds sailing in a sea of hot blue, with great shafts of sunlight splitting through the flowering apple trees and lilac bushes. A debonair day, very fine and brave!

Roger went off in one of his gay and careless moods which spurted out suddenly every now and then. Nellie thought he looked very young and jolly standing there on the front lawn joking and laughing with Justine . . .

'Really, Roger, really and truly!'

'Sure! Two of them if you want, or three — or five. Dammit, why not have five, eh, Justine! We'll do the thing in style.' They both roared with laughter.

Nellie, tucking a little bag of cakes into Roger's valise, looked up and smiled a trifle wistfully. They had such fun together . . . so many secrets . . . 'What is it, dear?' she asked. But the wind carried her voice off toward the daffodil bed — and they didn't hear.

'Now, remember, you've got to behave yourself while I'm away, young lady. No littleness, you understand, no littleness . . .'

Justine nodded seriously. She knew what that meant. All life was divided into bigness and littleness; and the littleness you despised and laughed at — but the bigness you reached for always and always.

While Roger strode down the gravel path, past the lilac bushes tumbling with bloom and round the corner into the golden street, they all stood on the vine-laced porch and waved good-bye: Nellie, very trim and youthful in her long, tight gown and cream scarf, and Bryce tall and lounging, and Justine swinging herself on the railing and making a great deal of noise . . .

'Good-bye, dear, and just have a nice, peaceful time . . .'

'Say, Roger, don't forget, will you Roger . . .'

'. . . a lovely rest, darling, and don't worry about us.'

'Good-bye, Roger, good-bye — good-bye —'

After he was out of sight, swallowed up in the golden haze of the afternoon, Nellie ran inside to make little chocolate puddings and sponge fingers for supper. Roger didn't like chocolate puddings, so it would be such a nice chance to have them.

Justine swung herself back and forth on the railing, her thin, black stockinged legs trailing out behind, her narrow eyes suddenly emptied of their laughter, and quiet, and a little lonely . . .

Roger's party made their camp on the bank of the Sagannee River, half a mile or so above the Sagannee Falls. It was still there, wood-bound and very remote, with a slip of pebbled beach and a long, white road of shining water . . .

Early in the morning after their arrival Roger went out in the canoe, standing in the stern very tall and gay, with his paddle dipping up and down like a thin yellow blade. Those on the shore didn't notice anything until he called out suddenly and clearly . . . And then they saw him being swept down the long road of shining water, being swept down lightly, swiftly, inevitably, with the pale new blue of the morning sky closing over him . . .

Nellie sat bunched up in a queer little heap while they told her.

The mellow sunshine of the afternoon flowed into the comfortable parlor with its books and lamp and satin cushions, and its bowls of spilling lilac. It filled the room with gold and heat, the air seemed almost solid with it . . .

Nellie's white hands were held together in her lap; they were quite still like marble, they were like fluttering doves fallen heavily to earth. A voice roamed on and on, very gentle and compassionate and low; a constant drone of solicitude that was somehow stifled in the heavy gold.

'Nellie, dear, you understand that everything was done — everything — everything ——'

And within Nellie Blythe something was crumbling — a high wall, a careful wall, of placidity and peace and of all the tranquil happiness life had builded for her. She sat bunched up, seeing a new picture . . . Roger, so cool and careless and debonair, flying out over the falls like a bird. Not afraid — Roger would never be afraid; laughing, perhaps, but not afraid. Just flying forward in the pale misty light of the morning . . . slim and erect . . . like a bird flying straight into the heart, the golden heart, of the morning.

Nellie fainted quietly.

Justine sat stiffly on the edge of the slippery sofa, her face white and empty. After a little while she began to rock back and forth in a queer, silent fashion, her arms locked tightly about her thin knees . . .

Mrs. Landor and Mary put Nellie to bed and hovered over her anxiously. 'Poor, poor darling,' they said in shocked, dripping voices. 'Oh, the poor, poor darling . . .' They patted and smoothed things, and tiptoed here and there with a worried aimlessness. Like the voice, they were very kind — every one was very kind.

In the darkened parlor, fragrant with lilac, Justine, small and alone, rocked back and forth in a dreadful silence . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

I

For several months Nellie Blythe foundered about like a broken and rudderless ship. Her neat little philosophy, all her tidy, serene thoughts, so carefully arranged and labeled, had been swept into a hideous jumble. Roger, who had filled her with a great happiness and a great love at a garden-party long ago, had now, quite suddenly, blasted the whole structure of her world, the whole plan of life. Out of order there was nothing but chaos — nothing but chaos . . .

Nellie did not dare to look ahead; she hid behind the present and closed her eyes and stopped her ears. The present, the little bit of present, was safe enough. Aunt Harriet's money would take care of that. But only for a time — a certain strip of time. After that . . . but Nellie would not look after that. 'Something will happen,' she cried over and over. 'Something will have to happen — will *have* to.' She clung to the thought fiercely, irreversibly, with a blind force borne of great fear. 'Something has got to happen; if you just wait, things will go on . . . they are bound to go on . . .' She said it dully at first, because it hadn't seemed to matter much then whether things went on or not. Nothing had mattered but the terrible fact of Roger's going. But now that first feeling of utter blankness was passing away ('Time,' people observed, nodding wisely, 'time, you know!'), and very slowly, very dimly, Life was beginning to emerge once more as a plan . . . Sometimes things were hurt and broken and crushed; sometimes the scheme was all but lost in a horrible confusion; but if one kept going forward, quietly, carefully, it would straighten out again, things would adjust themselves, click back into place — the wide stream would sweep steadily on.

'We mustn't worry,' said Nellie in a voice that had lost all its singing and lilting. 'Roger wouldn't want us to worry. Something will have to happen ——'

'But why?' asked Justine directly. 'Why has it got to happen?'

Nellie answered her vaguely, like a child: 'Because — because ——' She could go no further. After the 'because' was a towering wall . . .

Justine thought it rather silly. And, besides, it was cowardly — just sitting in a corner and expecting something to drop down on you because you were afraid to get up and go after it. 'Roger wouldn't do that,' mused Justine, her white face cupped in her hands. 'It is — *little*.'

Winnie thought it very beautiful. 'Dearest,' she wrote, with a great many flourishes and tear-blots, 'I have never, never known any one to take it all so calmly and sweetly. I know if it had been Hector I should have perished, simply *perished!* I'm like that, dear, not at all brave. But you are wonderful; I don't see how you do it, darling, really I don't . . .'

Mrs. Landor and Mary felt that it was sweet and all that, but they were both just a trifle worried. They did wish dear Nellie would rouse herself a tiny bit, make a few plans, begin to think definitely of what loomed ahead. Aunt Harriet's money would last two — three years, certainly no longer even with the most careful and expert management. Dear Nellie really ought to consider that! They weren't criticizing, of course; they were just a trifle worried.

It was Justine who made the first move toward starting a family income. She disappeared early one Saturday morning in February and returned just before supper, weary but decidedly triumphant, with seventy-five cents (dimes, nickels, and pennies) wrapped up in her handkerchief.

As far as could be gathered from a jubilant, slightly

incoherent recital, she had earned the money sweeping snow off Mrs. Porter's back porch, taking two infants (who had been rashly committed to her care) for a morning outing, running from three to four errands for Mr. Hinklestein, the Ideal Grocer (self-styled and pathetically erroneous), and winding up by taking all Miss Leland's lapdogs for a saunter in the park.

'One of the kids fell on its nose,' she announced cheerfully over the supper-table. 'And I just shook it and said, "You nasty little thing, you, if you cry I'll throw you away, *so there!*" And, minja, it believed me right off and never even blinked . . . and the dogs had a fight. Say! you ought to have heard 'em — a *real* one, like this —' She growled ominously, a spoonful of blanc-mange poised in the air. 'And that crazy Floppit has a hole right through his ear . . . Say! do holes fill in, holes in ears?'

'Don't be silly,' said Bryce in a superior tone. (He wasn't sure if holes filled in.)

'And Mrs. Howler got awful mad because old Hinklestein sent bacon that was all fatty,' Justine rattled on cheerfully. 'She said, "The Big Bonehead," right out loud . . . and the potatoes bust in the street . . . and . . .'

Nellie was puzzled and rather dismayed at this outbreak of activity. She had a little talk with Justine after supper. 'It was sweet of you, darling; Mamma understands that. But you are such a little girl — it doesn't seem quite right. Another time . . . well, the puppies, perhaps, if you are very careful. But not Mr. Hinklestein, dear!'

Justine was visibly downcast. With seventy-five cents coming in regularly every week she had felt confident that the family ship could be kept afloat for an indefinite length of time. She went to bed moody and disappointed, her feet clumping heavily on the stairs.

After she had gone, Nellie sat staring into the fire. Funny, tempestuous little Justine — whom Roger had loved best of

all. It hurt Nellie to think this, but she knew that it was true. In some way, in some queer, unexplainable way, Justine had been closer to Roger than she had ever been. Justine had understood things about him, shared things with him . . . Nellie had stood in a doorway and looked on, wistful but uncomprehending.

Justine carried a bent, smudgy picture of Roger in her pocket wherever she went. She never took it out in public, but sometimes Nellie saw her pass her hand over it with a little tender, stroking movement, her green eyes emptied of their laughter, a wavering, secret smile on her lips . . . That smile sent little hurt feelings through Nellie's heart, little slivers of pain. Once she tried to talk about the picture. 'Darling, show it to Mamma, tell Mamma all about it . . .' and there was a note, half-pleading, in her voice.

But Justine only tilted back her head and gave a gulping and uncertain laugh . . . Justine kept Roger locked away in a deep and secret place.

When Nellie thought of Roger now, it was with great tenderness and great humility. She sensed, with a poignant clearness, that she had never really known him, that there was something strong and free and arrogantly fine that she had never understood. It made her feel very humble. Roger Blythe had been a great man, a deep man, and she, Nellie Pettingil, had been honored to be his wife. What if she hadn't always understood him, what if something in that brilliant medley of his make-up had eluded her — she had been loving and thoughtful, she had done her best . . .

And so Nellie turned blindly from the future and tried to dull the past while, very slowly and carefully, she built up her little world again — drawing a new order out of the chaos of the old. Every one about her was most helpful. They all said nice, admiring things in loud whispers: 'Such

a brave little soul . . . borne up wonderfully, simply wonderfully . . . a beautiful example . . .'

Just now and then it would come over Nellie suddenly that she had lost something, some part of her innermost self. Roger had carried it over the falls with him on that misty spring morning months ago. She didn't quite know what it was; but it was gone now — a little lilting, singing feeling . . . a mere flutter . . . a mere nothing.

2

It was in July that Winnie's momentous letter arrived, very fat and scrawly and sizzling with exclamation marks and 'darling, isn't it wonderful's.'

'Oh, Nellie, I'm so excited! And she's such a sweet old lady — much nicer than taking in sewing, don't you think so, dear? Sewing must get so really *deadly!* And she said the duties would be quite light. I asked her very specially: "My dear Mrs. Grosslap," I said, "you are quite, *quite* sure, because she has been through a great sorrow and all, and I wouldn't want her to have to do anything strenuous, you know." "Oh, no," said she, "it will be quite light." So there you are, darling, and isn't it wonderful!'

After she had read the letter through, Nellie wept a little from sheer force of habit, and then cheered up and felt mildly triumphant. *There!* She had known it right along — known that everything would work out harmoniously and simply — known that the great plan of Life would unfold quite naturally if she but waited with patience. A little air of relief and complacency settled over her, soft and silken and absurdly becoming. She was rather like one who, having consistently asserted that the earth was flat in the face of immense opposition, had suddenly had her claim verified by coming to the edge. '*There!*' said Nellie with a little flourish of emphasis. 'I knew it — I knew it!'

She gathered up the numerous pages of Winnie's letter and ran out into the back garden to tell the children, her cheeks pink with excitement and her eyes very wide and blue.

Justine was lying flat on her stomach exploring the face of the earth for worms. (She sold these, ten cents a dozen, to Dr. Scotty across the road for his week-end fishing trips.) Bryce was mending Wilbur Picklebaum's wagon which, after several days of suspicious limping, had discarded a hind wheel. Wilbur himself was seated on the steps of the narrow porch, eating bread and brown sugar with an air of exquisite relish.

Nellie sat down beside him. 'Oh, darlings! the most wonderful thing — Mamma has the most wonderful thing to tell you!'

'Five,' muttered Justine, shifting a little.

'Something has happened — Bryce, Justine, we're going away!'

'Holiday?' asked Wilbur brightly.

'No, to live. We're going away to live; didn't Mamma always tell you . . .'

'Gosh — where!' from Bryce in mild astonishment.

'Aldington, dear. Aunt Winnie — you remember Aunt Winnie — has got Mamma a — a —' she hesitated delicately, 'a sort of position. Now isn't that lovely?' Her tone invited an outbreak of applause. 'And you and Justine are going to live with Aunt Winnie for a little while — isn't it *sweet* of Aunt Winnie? Oh, I'm so happy, darlings . . .'

Justine rolled over on her side, a worm suspended between two fingers. 'We're going away?' she demanded incredulously.

'Yes, pet, to Aldington, to Aunt Winnie's. (Put it away in the box dear, Mamma doesn't like to see it wriggle.) And you and Bryce ——'

'I don't want to go,' with emphatic finality.

Now, Justine, is that kind . . .'

'I *won't* go!'

'*Justine!*' There were little puckers of distress along Nellie's white forehead. 'Mamma wants to go, Bryce wants to go, and — and Papa would want us to go . . .' She said 'Papa' in the same careful, deferential voice as she said God.

'Sure!' encouraged Wilbur, who was a chatty, slightly rude little boy.

Justine dug her elbows into the ground. 'How do you know Roger would?'

Nellie looked out across the garden with its stooping apple trees and clumps of golden glow swaying in the wind. 'Papa,' she answered, very slowly and earnestly, 'would want us to have the very best; he would want us to have nice things to eat and wear and do. I am sure — quite sure — that he would want us to go to Aldington.'

'I don't mind it,' said Bryce quickly. 'It'll be kind of fun . . .'

'Sure!' commented Wilbur agreeably.

Nellie stood up, shaking out her skirt with plump, white hands. 'It's beautiful,' she declared with a little glow. 'There won't be any more sewing now, something — oh, much nicer! I am sure we should all be most grateful to dear Aunt Winnie — and now I'll run off and tell Aunt Mary about it . . .' She rustled through the door and down the cool hallway. Nellie always loved to tell news as soon and as frequently as possible. She was a human sieve in excellent condition.

Justine lay silent on the warm, brown earth, the wind ruffling over her. Outside she was very quiet and still, but inside there was a great clamor. 'I don't want to go!' she was crying. 'This is Roger's house, Roger's garden . . . this is where Roger lived . . . I don't want to leave it . . .' Outside she was very quiet with the wind ruffling over her.

Three days later, Nellie left for Aldington. 'To make

arrangements,' she said. Winnie had suggested it in her letter: 'Come up and stay for a week, darling, and then you can get acquainted with Mrs. Grosslap and chat things over and all . . .' Nellie thought it a very good idea. She liked chatting things over and all!

Justine and Bryce were left in charge of Mrs. Picklebaum next door and The Girl who still clung, with pathetic tenacity, to the depleted household. She was more wistful, more negative than ever, and going a trifle gray, but she still possessed an unlimited capacity for crashing a room into order. After a long and arduous period of trying to retain a cool and business-like attitude, Nellie had ended up by loving her dearly. 'It is because she has been so sweetly considerate,' she explained to Mrs. Landor. 'Especially all through my sorrow . . .' (Nellie usually spoke of her sorrow as if it were a cold or a confinement.)

She went off early in the morning, fluttering with the pleasant anticipation of seeing dear Winnie and Aldington and Hector and Valerie-Maud and Mrs. Grosslap, and riding in a train again after a lapse of seven years. She took a little box of jelly sandwiches and fat, juicy grapes, and a long strip of toffee which was nice and convenient to suck and not so fattening as chocolate. ('I must be just a *little* careful,' Nellie thought.)

She got a very good seat in the train, next to a window so that she could watch the scenery, and enjoy the air, and throw her lunch-box and grape pips out when she wished to, and lean her elbow on the sill for comfort, and read the names of the stations without craning her neck — there were a multitude of neatly tabulated reasons why Nellie always made a point of sitting next to the window . . .

The train had given its first preliminary jolt when a little man scuttled down the aisle and popped into the seat facing her, with an apologetic smile for his intrusion. He was followed, more leisurely, by a little girl of four or five, who

clambered up beside him and sat there, very straight and wide-eyed, with her short legs dangling far above the floor like white tassels on the red plush seat. Nellie surveyed them with the blank stare of a lady who is too polite and chaste to acknowledge the presence of a male.

He was a small man with thin, brown hair, very fine and smooth, and wistful, doggy eyes. He sat on the edge of the seat, stiff and upright, an epitome of careful and serious dignity. 'I may be a little man, but I am not to be trifled with,' his manner said quite plainly. Nellie wished he would sit back and make himself comfortable; she liked to see people looking comfortable, nestled back, padded about with cushions and softness . . .

The train jerked again and the little man was jogged forward like a cork. Nellie smiled at him reassuringly, because he looked so surprised and disconcerted at his bounce into the air. After a moment's reflection he smiled back, a slow, sweet smile, rather diffident. Nellie blushed; she hadn't meant to be forward or encouraging. One did have to be so careful what one did nowadays, she reflected inwardly. (As if in former times it had been perfectly safe and proper to beam upon strange gentlemen!) She flicked an imaginary cinder off her skirt with an air of complete absorption . . .

The little girl leaned back against the seat, her hair a shining bronze on the dusty red plush. Nellie glanced up at her, and smiled as a matter of course. One always smiled at children; and, besides, she loved children. She referred to them as 'little tots' and 'little dears,' and liked to pat them because they felt so warm and soft and smooth. If the little girl had been near enough, she would have patted her now. 'A pretty little tot,' she observed. Or, no, not exactly *pretty*. Different, rather, and such a lovely golden tan; no freckles like poor Justine. She did hope Justine would outgrow her freckles; they would be such a handicap to a girl at parties and things . . .

The little girl regarded her with a long, unwavering stare that was neither curious nor blank, but rather interested and friendly. 'Sweet eyes,' thought Nellie benevolently. Cool eyes, clear and thoughtful, with something else far back of them that was laughter . . . But Nellie never reached far back of things . . .

The train was rushing through country now, hilly and wooded and drenched with gold — pines, dark and tapering, and maples fluttering indolently in the heat, and birches very slim and silvery on their way up a stream.

The little man sat stiffly on the edge of the seat, swaying with the motion of the train, his hands folded precisely over a brown paper parcel. (Most uncomfortable! Nellie did wish he would lean back and stop wobbling.) And the little girl was close up to the window, her face pressed against the cool glass. . . (Dear little tot, she must give her some grapes later on; all little tots liked grapes — only you had to watch them, of course, to see that they didn't swallow the pips!)

The sun-splashed tangle of pine and maple and birch cleared away, and a long line of slim poplars stood out suddenly against the sky on the brow of a golden hill. The wind played through them, swinging and tinkling the green and silver leaves . . . The little girl looked up and laughed.

'Lovely,' she said. 'Lovely . . .'

3

It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon when Aldington was reached.

Nellie descended from the train in a pleasant state of palpitation, and remained in such for some ten minutes, after which period it was gradually borne in upon her that she was a lady in a strange place and, incredibly, unmet! The realization gave her a little jolt of surprise. What a very odd thing — to arrive in a town and have no one to meet you!

And not like Winnie; certainly not a bit like Winnie. She stood in the middle of the platform, looking appealingly helpless and bewildered, like a lost kitten.

It was at this point that the little man appeared. He popped up quite suddenly from some vague region in the rear. 'Ahem!' he began as if he were speaking a word of immense significance. 'Can I — that is, may I be of any assistance?'

'Dear me!' thought Nellie in surprise, 'How very clever of him to know that I need assistance!' She wondered what she ought to do. One did have to be so careful nowadays, what with this and that . . . And probably the gentleman was acting on the strength of that smile. A most delicate position! She brushed her nose daintily with a lavender handkerchief . . .

'I am familiar with our city — if I may be of any assistance . . .' He paused and whipped out a card from his pocket with the same startling rapidity that a detective in a play produces a revolver. He presented this to Nellie with a slightly apologetic air.

'E. William Blair,' she read, and wondered what the 'E.' stood for. (She had not yet learned that a first name reduced to an initial usually conceals a matter of embarrassment. In this case it was 'Ebenezer.') 'Oh!' she said a trifle blankly. 'You are very kind. My friends, you see, they . . .' She gave a helpless little gesture.

'Most unfortunate, madam, *most*,' declared Mr. Blair sympathetically. Then, after some consideration of the matter, 'A delayed letter, possibly. Yes, most certainly a delayed letter.' He seemed rather pleased with himself for having so quickly arrived at a conclusion. 'And what street, did you say, madam?'

'Longfellow, number nine,' said Nellie, and then stopped in a panic and wondered if she ought to have told him. A perfect stranger . . . and a man . . . One had to be careful!

'Longfellow Street. Ah, yes.' Mr. Blair brightened perceptibly. 'I am familiar with it. I know it very well. To be precise, I live on it myself.'

Nellie was immensely impressed. Either this was a gigantic move of wickedness or a very beautiful coincidence.

'Yes, indeed!' repeated the little man positively. 'Yes, indeed. I live on it. Charming street, madam, charming. Named after the poet, you know. Longfellow, the poet.'

'Really . . .' a little warily.

'Yes, indeed,' reiterated Mr. Blair complacently, rocking back and forth on his toes, a pleased smile on his face. 'Yes, indeed.' He appeared to be wound up . . .

'Well . . .' began Mrs. Blythe, coughing discreetly into the lavender handkerchief.

'Certainly!' with startling emphasis. 'Exactly, madam. I trust that I shall be permitted to escort you to the Earls.'

'Dear me!' Nellie's carefulness collapsed into downright astonishment. 'You know the Earls — the Hector B. Earls?'

'Assuredly, assuredly.' Again that pleased smile. 'I believe that I may say, without undue assumption, that Mr. and Mrs. Earl are friends of mine and I am friends of their . . . them . . .' He became a trifle confused. 'In brief, we are all friends,' he concluded brightly.

Nellie laughed as she presumed that this was intended to be something of a *bon mot.*

'In fact,' Mr. Blair continued with the air of one who still has another surprise or two up his sleeve, 'in fact, to tell the *truth,*' as if his previous loquacity had all been genial fibbing, 'to tell the truth, madam, I live next door. Number eleven.' This, apparently, was the long-postponed climax.

'Oh, really!' exclaimed Nellie with the proper astonishment.

Mr. Blair rocked back and forth and seemed, for a moment, on the verge of another spell of 'Yes, indeeds.' He

jerked up, however, into a sudden display of briskness. 'Well, madam, let us now proceed.' He picked up Nellie's suitcase in one hand and his own in the other. He staggered slightly.

'Oh, dear!' observed Mrs. Blythe, 'they're too heavy. I'm afraid. Let me . . .'

'Madam, I assure you,' said Mr. Blair with a new dignity, 'I am perfectly capable of handling them, I assure you.'

Nellie was rebuked and impressed. Sometimes these little men were incredibly strong; one never could tell. Another thought occurred to her. 'The little tot . . .' she questioned delicately.

'I beg your pardon, madam?'

'The little tot — the little girl?'

Mr. Blair looked distressed. 'Of course! My daughter. Where is she?' He gazed about vaguely, the suitcases dragging at his arms like iron weights.

Nellie turned round and looked up the long platform, a plump hand shading larkspur-blue eyes.

'Ah!' exclaimed Mr. Blair. 'The waiting-room. In fact, I shouldn't be at all surprised if she were in the waiting-room. The people, you know; she likes to watch the people.'

They proceeded rapidly to the waiting-room. The little girl was in there, sitting quietly on a long, slippery seat between a garrulous old lady, with whiskers like a cat, and an extremely bored, extremely foppish young man whose air of weariness was worn as naïvely as his violet tie. She was leaning back against the old lady, and watching the young man with a certain cheerful interest. She must have been doing this for some time because the young man was beginning to appear acutely uncomfortable under her frankly personal gaze.

Mr. Blair advanced and bade his daughter descend. She did so with apparent reluctance. The old lady patted her cheek and told her she was a 'real sweet little mite'; and

while she spoke all her whiskers waved gently and rhythmically. (A queer-looking person, Nellie thought; and not altogether nice and tasteful. One really had to be careful . . .)

'You were a bad, naughty little girl to run away,' began Mr. Blair when they were once more outside in the flare of afternoon sunshine. 'Really, Joan' — he coughed slightly and said, 'Really, Joan,' again in a reproachful voice. It was obvious that he was totally unversed in the art of reprimanding naughty little girls.

'She's been living with relatives,' he explained to Nellie in defense of his ignorance. 'Her mother, you know . . .' he paused significantly, 'when she was only four months old.'

'Dear me, how sad!' exclaimed Nellie with an air of shocked surprise. 'Poor little tot.' She patted the little tot because she was near enough this time.

'A difficult child,' confided Mr. Blair, a trifle uneasily. 'Her relatives, my late wife's relatives, do not feel that they can handle her any longer. She runs away, they tell me. A difficult child, *most!*'

'Just fancy . . .' in a consoling manner. Nellie wondered a little if all children weren't difficult; although running away, of course, was something rather special. Even Justine hadn't tried that.

'Now, then, a hack,' announced Mr. Blair, taking a fresh grip on the suitcases. 'A hack!' he repeated firmly and magnanimously.

'Oh, please,' protested Nellie half-heartedly.

'Not at all, madam; not at all, I assure you.' He walked briskly to the edge of the platform and made a noble gesture in the wrong direction. 'Here!' he commanded to the world at large.

An elderly maiden horse with a skittish manner pranced forward with a decrepit vehicle in her wake. 'Whoa, Elizabeth!' roared the plump gentleman with the reins. Elizabeth halted abruptly, and the plump gentleman half-fell and

half-bounced off his perch. 'Welcome to our town, sir!' he exclaimed with a vast smile that forced his cheeks almost to meet his ears.

'Thank you,' said Mr. Blair; 'but I live here.'

'Then, welcome, *madam!*' with a swift and easy transference of the smile.

'Er — thank you,' murmured Nellie indistinctly. As she stepped into the hack the plump gentleman rushed forward and gave her a full and most undignified boost, which almost sent her shooting through the opposite door. Then, with a comprehensive gesture, he swept Mr. Blair and the baggage inside, while Elizabeth curved herself round, loop-fashion, and watched them all with an amused eye.

'Oh — the little girl!' Nellie remembered, a trifle breathlessly.

And Mr. Blair poked his head out anxiously, and commanded Joan to come forth; and the plump gentleman did something curious and impressive with his voice so that it resembled a trumpet and a fog-horn and a cow all in one. 'Jo-un!' he bellowed, with his eyes lifted earnestly to the sky.

The little girl emerged, more or less promptly, from somewhere underneath Elizabeth, and clambered up into their midst.

Then the plump gentleman bounced onto his seat again, humming loudly and they went prancing off down the street. Sometimes Elizabeth galloped and sometimes she ambled and now and then she stopped completely for no apparent reason. At such moments the plump gentleman ceased humming and began to chat in a slow, yearning voice, and Mr. Blair hung out of one window and made inquiries, and Joan hung out of the other with an air of great interest, and Nellie, in the middle, tapped her foot and trusted vaguely that all would be well. After this, Elizabeth would draw in her breath and spurt forward like an engine, and every one inside would fall back in a heap and the plump gentleman

would pick up his tune where he had last left off, brandishing the whip baton-fashion.

During the more tranquil moments, Mr. Blair pointed things out; and Nellie gathered a little string of impressions — later to be moulded together into a definite and conclusive opinion of Aldington.

'A pretty place,' she noted. So many trees, spilling in cascades of green over the wide lawns, very shady and very gracious. Elms, probably — she must ask Winnie. Yes, elms: oaks didn't sweep out that way, and maples were smaller, and pines, of course, were quite different. *Elms* — that was it. She settled back comfortably, and tried not to think about Elizabeth.

After an eccentric journey they came to a sudden and breath-taking stop outside number nine Longfellow Street. Mr. Blair hopped to the ground and assisted Nellie to alight with a great deal of care and gallantry. Then he paid the plump gentleman with an offhand flourish, but discovered that he hadn't given him enough, which necessitated a delve into waistcoat pockets and a general fumbling which rather spoiled the grand effect.

'Thank *you!*' said the plump gentleman in a deeply grateful voice. Then he bounced onto his seat again and burst into song, and Elizabeth, after a moment's hesitation, drew in her breath and pranced down the street under the floating green shadows of the elms.

Mr. Blair turned from the curb and expanded once more. 'Well, here we are!' he announced in a pleasantly surprised tone, as if he had rather expected to be deposited elsewhere. 'Yes, indeed, here we are!'

'Yes, indeed,' echoed Nellie, who was beginning to flush and palpitate with excitement. 'Here we are.'

And the little girl Joan smiled suddenly . . .

'Well, madam, it has been a pleasure and a privilege, I assure . . .'

The front door of number nine burst open, and Winnie came rushing down the pathway between hordes of swaying cosmos. 'Dearest — dearest!' she shrilled breathlessly, her long nose working with emotion, and her wine-colored taffeta crackling and rustling and nearly tripping her at every step. She flung herself upon Nellie with heavy ardor, patting and kissing and declaring her joy in a jumble of words and gasps. 'Oh, darling, you don't know! — you simply don't know! — I'm so happy! I'm so excited! — Oh, darling!'

And Nellie Blythe, quite unaccountably, began to cry in a loose and broken fashion, her plump, carefully gloved hands clinging to Winnie's strong arm. 'There, dearest, there!' soothed Mrs. Earl, patting away with tender energy; 'I know just how you feel, what with poor Roger and all. There-there. There-there . . .' Winnie was a tireless and competent comforter.

Mr. Blair blushed slightly and turned aside with discreet tact. He considered it a very touching little scene. Girlhood friends, the happy reunion, and so forth. He rocked back and forth on his toes, assuming the air of one who is entirely oblivious of all about him.

Joan stood gazing at the weeping and excited ladies without embarrassment and without rudeness. In the sweep of sunshine, her hair was a warm brown-gold, the color of October leaves. It was blown back softly from her small, oval face . . . bound by the wind . . .

Winnie stopped short in the midst of her consolations. 'But where's Hector, darling?'

Nellie emerged from the lavender handkerchief. 'Hector . . .' she repeated waveringly, her long lashes curling back damply in little spikes.

'Didn't he meet you?' demanded Mrs. Earl in a shocked voice.

'Why, I looked, dear, really I — I ——' A last gentle sniff or two.

Mr. Blair made a polite rumble in his throat.

'Why, it's Mr. Blair!' observed Winnie, a trifle late in catching up. 'Good-afternoon, Mr. Blair.'

Having thus become the center of attention, Mr. Blair felt called upon to explain his presence. He did this with a nervous incoherency, and a good deal of kindly prompting from Nellie.

'How *utterly* sweet of you!' beamed Winnie at the close of the long and arduous recital. 'My, my, wasn't it sweet, darling? But, Hector, really . . .' A shade of exasperation slipped over her thin, pink face. 'He *promised!*' she exclaimed. And then, with resigned benevolence, 'Dear Hector! he has *such* a memory, you'll just have to forgive him, darling. He's inherited it, you know. His Papa was just the same, and his Grandpapa too, they say. It runs in the family. His Mamma told me all about it when I came here. "Dear Hector," she said, "is a trifle absent-minded, Winnie; he inherits it; his Papa was" ——'

Joan shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and sighed loudly.

Winnie turned round and looked at her in surprise — given sufficient time and encouragement Winnie eventually noticed everything! 'Oh, is *this* the little girl?' she asked significantly.

Mr. Blair brought her forward hastily. 'My daughter,' he announced with the air of one who is forced to admit a rather unwelcome and decidedly bewildering fact.

'And such a sweet little tot,' inserted Nellie, who was cheering up again. 'Such a pretty brown, don't you think so, dear?'

Winnie bent forward with a mighty crackling and rustling of wine-colored taffeta, and a subdued creaking that was due to corsets in action. She smiled ingratiatingly. 'My, my, and isn't she a happy little girl now that she's going to live with her dear Papa? Isn't she a happy little girl?' with a

thumping emphasis on each word and a great deal of vivacious beaming.

Joan regarded her with clear, thoughtful eyes.

'Isn't she a happy little girl?' persisted Winnie, who, having once devised a question, was loath to give it up.

The little girl still retained a reflective silence.

'She doesn't talk much,' intercepted Mr. Blair apologetically. 'A quiet child, they tell me. In fact, a very quiet child . . .'

Joan looked up at him and smiled.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

On the following afternoon at three-thirty o'clock Nellie and Winnie sauntered forth from number nine Longfellow Street to call upon Mrs. Grosslap. They passed slowly down the flower-fringed pathway, buttoning their gloves and saying nice, admiring things about the weather and life in general . . . Nellie looked very trim and compact; a little gold-and-white figure in perfect order and perfect condition.

Winnie was dashing as usual, but slightly topheavy under a large flat hat of amethyst moire with prune velvet trimmings which clashed unfortunately with the peculiar pink of her nose. 'Now just keep calm, darling,' she advised excitedly, winding a long feather boa about her thin neck. 'It'll turn out beautifully, I know, because she is such a sweet old lady and all . . . Here, dearest, pat my collar down — no, just *here*. Pat *hard*, I don't mind. Isn't it sweet? Mamma's birthday present . . . But I'm sure if I were in your place, darling, I'd be petrified, simply petrified! I'm like that, you know; not at all calm and controlled.'

Nellie squeezed her arm affectionately. 'It was so sweet and lovely of you, dear, to see to things like this. So sweet and lovely . . .'

'I hope,' replied Mrs. Earl simply, 'that I shall always be ready to help my friends when they need me.'

And Nellie thought that very beautiful.

The wide length of Longfellow Street, stretching out before them, looked quiet and prosperous and golden in the mellow sunshine. High old houses with steep, pointed roofs and tall windows, with brass knockers and glimpses of heavily starched lace curtains, with narrow, winding verandas and shaded lawns; all very much alike, and all very stable and substantial.

Nellie loved it from the first. Its air of tranquillity soothed her; it was like a hand, soft and gentle, patting away all ruffles of worry and fear. Every wide and spreading tree spoke of peace; every old house seemed shadowed with content, deep content and serenity. Nice, comfortable sounds floated out on the summer air — the faint rustle of leaves far overhead, the subdued chatter of little girls across the road having a tea-party on the grass, the swish-swish of somebody's hose . . . Familiar, homey sounds. Nellie loved it all. I belong here, she thought; this is my place . . . I belong here . . .

They paused for a moment in front of Mr. Blair's house.

'All by himself,' murmured Winnie sympathetically. 'And such a really depressing housekeeper, darling. She wears her hair in curlers all morning — just think of it! And they say she — but I mustn't gossip, must I! And anyhow I don't believe it. Do you think a person would serve beans for six nights right off, Nellie? Well, I don't either! See the border, dear, isn't it sweet?'

They were about to pass on when they noticed the little girl Joan. She was off by herself at the side of the house where the grass was thick and long and sprayed with scarlet poppies that had been planted in a far-away time. A lovely, wavering spot it was, of careless beauty, beyond the elms and their trailing green shadows . . . beyond the clipped decorum of the Street. The little girl Joan was playing there, dancing and skipping about with head thrown back and slim, brown arms stretched wide to the wind. Up and down through long, sweet grass all waving and swaying in the sunshine; up and down through scarlet poppies, swiftly, lightly, with a wind-born grace. A small rapt figure in a crumpled blue dress . . . utterly happy . . .

The two ladies stood on the sidewalk and watched with interest.

'Dear little tot!' remarked Nellie in an indulgent tone.

'What's she supposed to be doing?' inquired Mrs. Earl, who was always curious first and appreciative afterwards.

'Playing, dear, I expect. Children are so quaint, don't you think so? She's probably playing a game . . .' It was the slightly amused, slightly condescending tone of one who is aware that she has attained a vastly superior state in life.

Joan caught sight of them and stopped short in her dance – and it was as if a flame had been suddenly blown out . . .

'Hello, darling,' chirped the ladies brightly, waving their parasols.

The little girl plunged her hands deep into the pockets of her crumpled blue dress. 'Hello,' she returned without enthusiasm.

'And how do you like living with your dear Papa?' inquired Winnie. (Again that peculiar intonation, over-sweet and over-gracious.)

Joan considered the question. 'Yes,' she decided after a pause.

'Why, of course, you do, pet,' with brisk approval. 'And you must come and see my little girl soon — you would like that, wouldn't you?'

Joan seemed uncertain. 'Is she nice?' she asked.

'Why, of course, darling,' put in Nellie tactfully.

Joan still looked dubious. 'I don't like them if they're *too* nice,' she explained.

Winnie was somewhat shocked. 'Nothing can ever be *too* nice,' she reproved.

This statement was accepted for consideration, and then almost immediately rejected. 'Yes,' said the little girl. 'Often.'

The ladies glanced at one another meaningly. 'A difficult child!' their raised eyebrows exclaimed.

Joan politely veiled her impatience. She wiggled her toes down into the warm brown earth where the thousand little roots of a thousand blades of grass were hidden away.

'Mostly,' she volunteered, 'I like to play with myself.'

'And what do you play, dear?' inquired Nellie. (Little tots always loved to chat about their games and things.)

Joan thought a moment. 'Well . . . there's the White Ship, and Ala-mel-wawa . . .' she ticked them off slowly. 'And Groggles, of course,' as an afterthought.

'Groggles . . .' repeated Winnie blankly.

Joan nodded. 'It's an old one,' she explained obligingly. 'It's the happiest one too.'

'What's it like?' demanded Winnie curiously.

The little girl became suddenly silent. She seemed to withdraw behind a fine and delicate veil of reticence. After a moment or so, having evidently decided upon a campaign of retreat, she slipped into the grass and began to crawl toward the back of the house. A swaying line of scarlet poppies marked her course . . .

The ladies glanced at one another again. 'Good-bye,' called Nellie firmly, feeling that outward form at least should be observed.

There was a rustle and flutter from somewhere farther back, and Joan sat up abruptly once more. 'Good-bye,' she said politely. 'I'd like to come and see your daughter if you want me to — but mostly I play with myself.' And having thus performed all that was required of her, she again plunged under cover.

Nellie and Winnie resumed their walk down the street, two well-dressed, genteel ladies, highly mystified. 'Her poor Papa,' murmured Mrs. Earl sympathetically. 'It must be such a responsibility, a queer child like that, don't you think so, dear? You never can tell . . .' Her voice trailed off into a significant silence.

Nellie felt very sorry for Mr. Blair — such a nice, gentle little man, and so completely helpless when it came to little girls . . .

It didn't occur to either of them to feel sorry for Joan.

2

MRS. GROSSLAP'S home was some five blocks away; a large ornate house with an air of depressed dignity. There were little wooden scrolls and fig-leaves and other odds and ends of adornment scattered about over the exterior, and a number of round turrets bulging the roof, each very high and bleak. On the front door was a huge brass knocker in the form of a lion's head with yawning mouth and glaring eyes. It was the most unpleasant-looking knocker that Nellie had ever seen; but it was all so highly polished that it served conveniently as a mirror while one waited without.

Nellie made little, fluttery pats at her blond hair, and shook out her lace-ruffled parasol . . .

'You look perfectly sweet,' whispered Winnie whose taffeta bosom was heaving heavily. 'And so composed, dearest; I don't see how you do it, really I don't . . .'

A pimply maid, with one blue eye and one brown and a general air of disappointment in life, admitted them and led the way down a series of hot, soft-carpeted halls which were hung with pictures of fruit groups and fish groups and vegetable groups, so that one got a hazy impression of passing along a counter lavishly laid out with bulging cherries and tapering carrots and slippery, speckled trout. At the end of one corridor there was a large, gilt-framed reproduction of 'The Soul's Awakening.' 'Very pretty,' commented Nellie. (Although a trifle out of place, perhaps, between turnips and salmon.)

After an appetizing if intricate pilgrimage, they were ushered into a room that smelt dimly of staleness and camphor and an indescribable something which was later found to be cats.

For a moment or so Nellie could discern nothing in the shadows, and then gradually the figure of Mrs. Grosslap emerged from out the gloom . . . She was thin and wilted with a dismal, heavily powdered face surmounted with

frizzy, gray hair which stood out like a slightly dusty halo. Mrs. Grosslap was, strictly speaking, a mere woman; but somehow she managed to convey the impression that she was grief and tribulation personified. It wouldn't have been surprising to see her suddenly run off in a stream of water. Indeed, one almost felt that there ought to be pails about to receive her . . . An absurd person, inspiring absurd conjectures.

Winnie advanced with an air of hushed reverence. 'My dear Mrs. Grosslap, may I present Mrs. Blythe . . . we came as you requested . . . my dearest friend, Nellie Blythe.' This brief speech, although singularly lacking in unity, sounded almost impressive, like an oath of allegiance or a vow of total abstinence.

Mrs. Grosslap extended a large, flat hand which Nellie shook with the greatest of care. 'And so this is our poor, brave little Widow,' and it sounded as if the words were oozing out from between her moist lips. 'The sad story of your Bereavement has been told to me, and I mourn with you. A frightful Departure; a frightful Loss; and then nothing left at all but a frightful Blank . . .'

Nellie's white hands moved to her heart, and pressed there quietly as if she had been surprised by a sudden dart of pain. Moments like these lurked round occasional corners; they were there, and then gone, like a cold rush of wind . . .

Winnie, seated expectantly in the lap of a squat, brocaded chair, shed an aura of sympathy on every one and everything about her. She felt a little like crying, because it was so sweet and tragic and all . . .

Mrs. Grosslap leaned back and closed her eyes. 'I, too, have Suffered,' she murmured. 'Three times, my dear — and all Husbands,' this last with a certain air of achievement. 'Three times,' she repeated as if to assure Nellie that she was a mere novice in the gentle art of Grief. Then, with a wan show of briskness: 'We two whom Life has treated so

Harshly; we two who are Battered and Bruised, we shall comfort and sustain one another here, apart from the World, in, but not of, it.' Words dripping into the dimness like slow drops of water.

Nellie folded her hands in her lap. 'It will make me very happy to be with you,' she replied gently — and then stopped and wondered if that were an exactly appropriate beginning. Somehow, the word 'happy' struck an irrelevant, almost flighty, note in this sagging atmosphere.

'You will wish to know your Duties,' continued Mrs. Grosslap. 'They will be few and simple: to read to me from time to time; to supervise the preparation of my meals; to attend to my wardrobe and my correspondence. But, above all, above all, to share my Grief.' She bowed her frizzled head.

So did Winnie. And after a moment or two, so did Nellie. Winnie felt that it was a very holy and sacred moment; Nellie felt a trifle bewildered . . .

After a pause Mrs. Grosslap roused herself. 'What is Life to me now?' she demanded. 'What is Life, I say, with my Beloved departed?'

It was very touching, although not quite clear to which Beloved she was referring. Winnie sat on the edge of the seat, breathing hard, her eyes full of tears.

Mrs. Grosslap flopped back again. 'I fear I have overdone myself,' she said weakly. 'This resurrection of the old, old happy Past always tends to leave me Exhausted. Perhaps you had better leave me now . . .' (The ladies rose hastily.) 'Another time we will discuss Salaries, when I feel a little stronger. But I am always Generous, poor, brave little Widow, *always*,' with a gloomy satisfaction.

'She can be ready in two weeks, I guess,' Winnie hurried in. 'Can't you, darling? Mamma will help you pack, and Mary and Picky; and the children can come right on to me and all . . .'

Nellie nodded vaguely.

'Very well,' Mrs. Grosslap tolled out once more. 'In two Weeks, my dear. I will be Waiting . . .' She closed her eyes. After several minutes Nellie and Winnie decided that the interview was at a close. Mrs. Grosslap, apparently, had already embarked upon her period of waiting.

They tiptoed out of the room. The pimply maid escorted them through the labyrinth of halls to the front door, which she opened and closed with morose leisure. The ladies paused for a moment, blinking in the sudden clear gold of the afternoon. An ice-wagon, very yellow and bright and gay, rumbled up the street. Inside, blocks of silver sparkled and glinted under a slanting rush of sunshine . . .

Nellie slid open her parasol. 'But I don't want to grieve,' she was thinking blankly. 'Everything has straightened out again now . . . I don't *want* to grieve.'

'One of Life's great tragedies!' observed Winnie solemnly and reverently.

It didn't occur to her that there might have been *three* tragedies!

3

Nellie encountered Mr. Blair several times before she returned to 'break up the dear, dear home,' as Winnie called it. (Winnie rarely overlooked an opportunity to indulge in a little sentiment.) She met him one evening on the street just before supper-time, with a loaf of bread and two cans of beans under his arm.

He seemed extremely gratified to hear that she was going to make Aldington her home. 'Excellent!' he declared quite jauntily. 'Excellent, I assure you. We — that is, our town — the town will be greatly pleased, my dear madam, to have you in our — their — its midst.' He rocked back and forth on his toes with an animated air.

Nellie leaned gracefully (but not too heavily) upon her

flounced parasol. 'It's such a sweet place,' she observed. 'And so lovely for my dear children. I think children really *need* birds and trees and flowers and things, don't you, Mr. Blair? It's like a leaf turning to the sun. They *need* it!'

'Yes, indeed,' Mr. Blair nodded emphatically. '*And* the travel. A remarkable thing, travel, my dear Mrs. Blythe!'

'Oh, lovely, Mr. Blair; and so broadening. That's what Mrs. Landor, Winnie's — Mrs. Earl's — mamma always says. So broadening! She goes up to Canada every spring to visit her niece.'

Mr. Blair slackened his hold on the loaf of bread and the two cans of beans, and his brown eyes grew suddenly musing and dreamy. 'A beautiful thing, travel,' he said in a slow, caressing voice. 'Some day I intend to tour the Orient — India, Egypt, and Japan. I have read much pertaining to them, the pyramids . . . temple bells . . .' A wistful quietness drifted across his face. And then he drew himself up sharply like one who has just remembered . . .

The following evening he made a formal call at number nine, bringing the little girl Joan with him.

They all sat in the parlor cooling themselves off with the stiff cardboard fans Winnie had bought at the last Ladies' Aid Bazaar. (Winnie was forever picking up this and that at bazaars and church sales — silly little aprons and pincushions and napkin rings which ladies love to make and sell and buy for no apparent reason. She always referred to them as 'bargains,' which, of course, they never were. Like the fans. She had paid ten cents each for them to assist the heathen, and at Raster's Grocery round the corner they gave one away free with each pound of tea. The Ladies' Aid was just a trifle grasping; but since it grasped for the Lord, the matter was politely overlooked.)

The windows of the parlor were wide open so that the rising breeze swelled the lace curtains until they were like belly-

ing sails on a high sea. They flew out whitely in the shallow glow of the lamp — the room seemed to be full of white curtains.

Mr. Blair sat stiffly on the edge of his chair and told a number of very long and very intricate stories, the points of which became somehow lost in the general scuffle of words. Having concluded this private repertoire he branched off into a discussion on the Importance of Beauty, bolstering up his assertions from time to time with a quotation which vastly impressed the Earls. Then he led the way into a dissertation on the Vital Necessity for Honest and Courageous Thinkers to Guide the General Populace. He addressed himself mainly to Mrs. Blythe, as if she were especially prepared to follow and appreciate his arguments . . .

'It is so essential, I feel, that the men who command an audience, in whatever capacity it may be, should fearlessly stand by their principles, even if these seem too — er — radical, say, to be entirely acceptable to every one; for honesty and courage, so to speak, are the only worthy moulders of public opinion, and we should — well —— Do you not agree with me, Mrs. Blythe?'

'Oh, my, *yes!*' assented Nellie brightly.

And, at regular intervals, the Earls bore down with obliging approval.

The piano-from-next-door-but-one came wavering and rippling in on the breeze, bridging over the gaps in conversation with a thin line of music. Nellie kept time with her foot; she was very fond of tunes, especially 'Silver Threads Among the Gold' and 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes.'

In the middle of the evening Mr. Earl rose, bade them all a cheerful good-night, and left the room. His retiring hour was nine-thirty P.M., and like time and tide it waited for no man.

'Hector does so enjoy his sleep,' explained Winnie benevolently, after she had persuaded Mr. Blair to resume his

seat. 'He's like that, you know; he really *enjoys* it. When I first came here, his Mamma used to say to me, "Now Winnie, let Hector sleep because he really enjoys it." He inherits it, too; his Papa was just the same so his Mamma says . . .'

Mr. Blair rocked back and forth, smiling pleasantly. Mr. Blair had a peculiar weakness for rocking-chairs; they made him feel as if he were getting somewhere . . .

Over in a corner by the billowing curtains Valerie-Maud, the daughter of the house, was entertaining the little girl Joan. She had adopted a patronizing, arbitrary air by virtue of her three years' seniority, and, at the present moment, she was amiably engaged in showing off her profound knowledge of the world and its ways, and in disclosing her small guest's amazing lack of it.

'You don't know any hist'ry?' she demanded with extravagant astonishment. 'Why, you funny little thing you, doncha know *anything?*'

Joan, looking very sleepy and uncomfortable in a starched white dress that was sashed somewhere near her knees, regarded her with drooping gray eyes.

'My goodness gracious, you *are* a funny little thing!' sighed Valerie-Maud with the air of an elderly lady confronted with a rather exasperating puppy. She was feeling important and expansive and very, very superior. She leaned over and removed a thread from Joan's sleeve, her little finger delicately crooked. 'Can you play hop-scotch?' she asked.

A glimmer of interest skimmed across Joan's face. 'What's it like?' she inquired.

Valerie-Maud described the sophisticated sport with half a dozen flourishes: 'Y'see, you put it here . . . and then you hop . . . and there . . .'

'Oh . . .' Joan's attention wandered. She gazed at the clock and tried to make out which was the big hand and

which the little one. The big hand ran around a lot more, she had discovered; but the little one had a gold tip . . . It was a rather funny clock; different from Aunt Maura's and different from Papa's. It had a picture of a lady in its middle, a rather silly lady, all pinky with a big, teethy smile and popped-out eyes. The kind of eyes that looked and looked and never saw anything . . .

'I say, you funny little thing,' began Valerie-Maud in a more confidential tone. 'D'you like boys?'

Joan sleepily considered the question. 'I don't know,' she returned a little uncertainly as if she couldn't quite remember what a boy was.

Valerie-Maud's last vestige of politeness vanished, swallowed up in a vast sense of contempt. 'You *are* a crazy little thing!' she declared scornfully, derisively. 'I don't believe you know anything, anything at all. Most probably you're an — an idget!' She landed heavily upon this and felt that the effect was very good.

Joan, however, remained unimpressed. Her attention again wandered to the lady in the clock. What made people give those big, teethy smiles? They weren't happy, not a bit happy . . . they were just like songs without any music . . .

Valerie-Maud was disappointed, having brightly anticipated tears. This crazy little thing probably didn't know what an 'idget' was; maybe she even thought it was something nice. You never could tell with these crazy little things . . . She searched for an expression more crushing and scathing. 'My mother,' she brought out at last with great aplomb, 'my mother says you're a difficult child!'

Joan glanced up. 'I know,' she said politely and patiently. 'They all do.'

Valerie-Maud, thus thwarted, resorted to a more elemental method of attack. She leaned over quickly and pinched Joan . . .

'Well,' announced Mr. Blair at an opportune moment, 'I presume we must be departing.'

'Oh, *must* you?' asked Mrs. Earl, who was one of those ladies who are always loath to see a visitor escape.

'I fear so, my dear madam, I fear so.' He beckoned to his daughter as if she were a little dog. 'A most enjoyable and pleasant evening, *most*, I assure you.'

Nellie and Winnie beamed with proper gratification. 'So glad, Mr. Blair . . . and so sweet of you to come . . . *and* the little tot . . .'

They moved along to the front door, Joan and Valerie-Maud trailing behind. Nellie switched on the veranda light so that the pathway was dimly blurred with yellow.

'And did *you* have a nice time, darling?' inquired Winnie, bending forward with a creak and a wide, stationary smile.

Joan raised candid gray eyes. 'Not very,' she said clearly but kindly. Then, as an afterthought: 'Your daughter pinches.'

Mr. Blair made a rumbling noise in his throat as if he were about to break out into a thunder-storm. He bowed once again with stiff gallantry, and then strode into the night, taking steps twice too long for his size.

Joan followed more leisurely, dragging her feet over the pebbled path so that they made a low, crunchy sound. The cosmos at her side, tall and frail and ghostly, flecked the darkness with clouded white. Joan brushed her hand across them very softly. 'Asleep . . .' she whispered. The cosmos swayed . . .

Winnie closed the door and turned off the round, fat lamp in the hall.

'Such a sweet evening,' remarked Nellie, collecting the frosted punch glasses. 'And such a nice gentleman, dear, isn't he?'

For a moment Winnie's thin nose wiggled slightly as if she had caught a sudden scent. But when she spoke her voice

was bland and artless. 'A really *sweet* man, darling, really sweet.' And then, after a pause, 'Such a funny little girl, isn't she, dear? It must be very hard for him . . . all by himself . . .'

She closed the window and patted the long lace curtains into neat folds.

4

For several days after she returned home the thought of the morbid Mrs. Grosslap rested heavily upon Nellie like a large, damp hand. Little trepidations and worries and fears trickled over her and leaked into her careful complacency . . . She was quite sure that Roger would not approve of her withdrawing from the world and spending the remainder of her earthly existence in an atmosphere of brooding grief. She felt, indeed, that it would annoy him intensely. He had always been so scathing and so clever when it came to plaintive, weepy people like dear Mrs. Potter, who had never recovered from the time her home burnt to the ground and her youngest son married a nice, stout little Jewess, who proceeded, with alarming rapidity, to present him with a host of stout little Abies and Rebeccas . . . Dear Roger, he used to say such brilliant, sarcastic things about Mrs. Potter. Nellie felt sure he would never have stood for Mrs. Grosslap.

Besides, this excessive grief was weak and a little bit cowardly. One owed a certain duty to Life; one should keep drifting with the stream, keep following the plan. It was natural and human. Moreover, she didn't *wish* to grieve! As Winnie so frequently remarked (with mingled wonder and admiration) she had passed through a great trial and come out of it beautifully. That was it — she had come out of it; she was on the other side now.

But then again, Mrs. Grosslap would only be for a time until something else more compatible and cheerful opened

up. The present would be taken care of, and the children provided for. *That* would please Roger, to know that they — Justine — were happy and sheltered and comfortable. Justine would have the whole golden length of Longfellow Street to live in and play in . . . Perhaps Roger, wherever he was, would be glad . . . and smile that odd, crooked smile of his that Nellie had loved but never understood.

The breaking-up of the 'dear, dear home' was attended with such turbulent and bewildering disorder as to reduce Nellie's weight by five and a half pounds. She had never suspected the work and confusion a procedure of this sort entailed.

She rushed about for days, briskly, ineffectually, poking this and patting that, issuing a score of contradictory orders — and deceiving no one but herself. The Girl was supremely in her element. Her very face wore a glow of ferocious determination, and her bangs and crashes were rendered with a sort of reckless abandon very stirring to the casual onlooker. She seldom ceased, rarely spoke, and, as far as could be ascertained, never ate. She was so inspiring that one felt instinctively that she should be cast in bronze!

Justine, although intensely interested in everything going on, was, on the whole, more of a liability than an asset. She dropped nails into boxes, locked trunks and promptly mislaid the keys, discovered that she had packed her best dress under all the winter coats, and once, in a sudden spurt of enthusiasm, made out thirty or forty labels to the wrong address. She had a number of minor clashes with The Girl, and one outstanding one in which two plates were smashed and several kicks and blows administered and received. After a brief period of anger and resentment, Justine was taking their moving in much the same spirit as she took a circus.

At the end of the week Mary and Mrs. Landor and the Picklebaums arranged for what was called 'a private sale' — a select affair to which were admitted only friends, acquaintances, and such individuals as appeared guileless and of honorable intent.

While this semi-social gathering chatted loudly and bargained politely, an army of suave Hebraic gentlemen waited without, biding their time. One or two had attempted to pass off as devoted husbands in search of a new piano for Gracie; but they had been quickly detected by the Picklebaums, who, in past years, had had occasion to do business with them . . .

Justine and Wilbur sat on the front steps and watched the patient group. They nudged one another, giggled, and made fatuous remarks when the inspiration came. They were very rude. But then so were the gentlemen, since no one had requested their presence on the lawn.

Bryce was inside lending a casual assistance to the harassed managers of the sale, while Nellie sat at the back of the parlor and wept a little. 'You just can't understand how it feels,' she murmured every now and then with quivering pink lips. 'To see your home go right before your eyes . . . you can't understand, dear . . .'

Every one was very kind and gentle to her even in the midst of the overwhelming rush.

The sale went splendidly. Mrs. Landor bought the fat, satin cushions, the red curtains (although she had just had her rooms redecorated in blue), and, after some inward qualms, the slippery, swaybacked sofa. The Picklebaums purchased three rugs and a bookcase for Wilbur (whose library at present consisted of four battered volumes and nine detective magazines). Mary, in a fit of reckless generosity, bought the entire dining-room suite, for which rash and uncalled-for act her dumbfounded spouse rebuked her most heartily at a later hour.

Every time an article was chalked or tagged as 'Sold,' Nellie sucked in her breath sharply and dabbed at her blue eyes. It was very pathetic. People were so affected that they began to buy vases and brooms and saucepans from sheer pity . . .

By nine o'clock in the evening practically everything of importance was disposed of, and the patient gentlemen from without were permitted to enter and wheedle and pick over the remains — much to Justine's delight. She trailed after them from room to room, pointing things out, advising, relating the history of each scar and deformity . . .

'Say, mister, see that over there? Well, once my mother spilt a whole pan of soup over it, mind! That's why it's puffy like that; and say, you can smell it too, if you get close enough . . . And see that thing over there? Well, if you undo the pin, the stuffing will all come out! Yes, it will too; I'll show you . . . and that folds up when you sit in it . . .' and so on in a steady, excited stream.

One of the dealers patted her over the head and gave her a peanut out of his pocket as if she were a monkey.

But when they began to squabble and scrap over Roger's shabby old desk with the broken ink-well and knobless drawers, Justine slipped away quietly, her face grown suddenly white and stiff.

That night they slept at the Picklebaums', and the little house next door with its lilac bushes and stooping apple trees was very empty and silent and alone. The moon silvered it and silvered it . . . until it was like a thin shell with shining, deserted windows . . .

The next day they left for Aldington. Every one was at the station, and practically every one wept and talked about the blank Nellie's going would leave in their lives. They were kind people and somewhat excited.

At the last moment a swarm of little girls of various races, sizes, and stations appeared on the scene to bid Justine fare-

well. They were all carefully dressed as if for a party, and most of them carried their car fares in plump, leather purses which they swung back and forth with a great air of nonchalance. Several of them so far forgot their dignity as to weep loudly; all spoke of their undying love in shrill, soprano voices edged with excitement.

Justine was very red and noisy with flashing green eyes. She hung halfway out of the window (while Nellie clutched the end of her petticoat) and wrote brief, pointless verses of her own creation in a steady stream of autograph albums. The little girls were entranced with them. They stood on tiptoe, their heads craned back so far that most of their hats fell off. Tears and lamentations were almost lost in reverent esteem for the poetess . . .

As the train began to move out slowly, they told one another with excited interest that it was going. They drew Justine's attention to the momentous fact. 'Dear, dear Justine, you're *going!*' they chorused piercingly. Justine shouted reckless promises to write to every one, her voice hoarse, her person perilously suspended in midair. The little girls gathered into an emotional group and waved their leather purses and shrieked and threw kisses indiscriminately. They were very hot and exhausted and disheveled when it was all over. They put on their hats, tidied their dresses, wiped their noses, and then walked through the station in a long line, holding one another's hands and buzzing with confidences. They swept through the waiting-room with superb poise, blocking the entire middle aisle, their purses and pigtails and thin, white-stockinged legs all moving in perfect unison.

Nellie at length succeeded in pulling Justine in by the end of her petticoat. Justine was grubby and messed and in a general condition of sooty disorder. Her hat was suspended over one ear; her elbows were red and creased from long pressure; but she wore an unmistakable air of satisfaction and

triumph. It had really been a splendid and most successful farewell! Justine liked plenty of noise!

Bryce, slouched back in the seat, was gazing with interest at a stout, purple-cheeked lady with a guilty smile who was attempting to conceal a small, dejected dog under her skirts. . .

Nellie sat upright, her wide, larkspur-blue eyes resting vacantly on the top of the red plush seat. A little bleak feeling passed over her suddenly like a chilling wind . . . Outside everything was rushing away — Mrs. Landor, Mary, the Picklebaums, and a small square house with tumbling lilacs . . . They were rushing away into the past; they were becoming dim and far away like shadows. Shadows and memories — they were all the same . . .

Quite suddenly Nellie wanted to touch the huddled lilac bushes, to thrust her hand into their cool, smooth leaves and feathery blooms; to pat them and hold them close . . . the lilac bushes that Roger had loved . . .

CHAPTER SIX

I

For a little over four months Nellie Blythe shared the Grief of Mrs. Grosslap to the best of her ability. She acquired a surface fondness for cats and a deep fondness for the maid with the assorted eyes, who wept on her shoulder every now and then and poured out her problems, spiritual, sentimental and financial.

After a time she learned, among other things, to differentiate between the three departed husbands whose memories presided over the household like three brooding clouds. There was Walter, Grief number one, who had been blondly handsome, but a trifle flighty owing to a lax upbringing and a tendency to bury his worries in what Mrs. Grosslap referred to darkly as 'a spree.' Then there was Brodie, Grief number two, who, after a very fine beginning in the pickle business, had gone off abruptly and been lost at sea. Mrs. Grosslap always spoke as if it had been unpardonably careless and inconsiderate of him to so mislay himself. Both she and the pickle business had suffered severely for a time, only to cheer up later under new management. And lastly, there was Hiram, who had had something to do with oil and something else to do with steel and a remote interest of some sort in copper. 'A virile man,' Mrs. Grosslap always remarked. And evidently a versatile one. He didn't appeal to Nellie particularly, although she was most sympathetic and gentle when he was under discussion. Somehow, Hiram always seemed oddly like a factory or a mine; very important, no doubt, but not quite human. In his pictures he was all beard and eyebrows with a remote suggestion of nose. Virile in a hirsute way!

Mrs. Grosslap viewed the husbands with an impartiality

born of perspective. Sometimes she mourned them individually and by name, but more often they all merged into one depressing whole, and her slow, dripping references to 'My Beloved' would cover the entire range from Walter to Hiram. It was a trifle confusing and misleading at first, but Nellie soon caught on to the general idea. It worried Winnie, however, who was always asking, 'Which one is it, darling?' in a loud, uneasy whisper. Winnie felt that husbands should receive their properly apportioned dues, singly, not collectively. Mrs. Grosslap's practice smacked just a little of a time-saving device. (But she mustn't criticize, of course, because the poor old lady had been through so much and all . . . Winnie's kindness eventually rode like a wave over everything else.)

It was in the early part of December, while Aldington was caught in its first swirl of snow, that Mrs. Grosslap suddenly announced to a startled and incredulous household her intention of entering the bonds of matrimony for the fourth time. 'Some day in the spring,' she added with a sort of mournful smirk on her heavily powdered face.

The latest gentleman to be caught napping was an undertaker, who, since youth, had taken a professional interest in bereaved ladies. His name was Ripply (which sounded deceptively light and airy), and he was tactful to the point of genius when it came to comforting widows and children, calming hysterics, reviving fainting mourners, and introducing shreds of Scripture at just the opportune moment. In past years he had 'arranged' for Walter and Hiram, and done it very handsomely and fairly cheaply with plumed horses and a great deal of black taffeta ribbon. On both occasions he had fanned Mrs. Grosslap and sustained her with sherry and Biblical passages.

He was large and flat and white, and always smelt as if he had just emerged from a warm room heavy with thick cream

lilies. He had a habit of gazing at people with a thoughtful, contemplative air, as if he were making secret calculations as to their width and length in view of a future coffin. One felt that his thoughts must dwell perpetually upon such matters as white satin linings and silver handles. His proposal to Mrs. Grosslap was the most spectacular act of his career.

He disturbed Nellie and gave Winnie the 'creeps.' Indeed, both ladies were decidedly upset by this sudden trend of events. For one thing, was it quite *nice*, with such an old lady and all, and with three tragedies hovering over the union? And then again, although nothing definite had been said so far, there was a general insinuation in the atmosphere that when Mr. Ripply came in, Mrs. Blythe would go out. It was very disconcerting . . .

'Oh, dear,' thought Nellie. '*Now* what will happen?'

'Perhaps, darling,' suggested Winnie, rubbing her long nose thoughtfully, 'perhaps we had better begin to look about for something else.'

Nellie's plump white hands made a little fluttering gesture. 'But where?' she wondered. 'Where . . .'

2

One evening just before Christmas Mr. Blair overtook Nellie on her way to the Earls.

It was clear and keen out with a black sky stabbed with stars, and a whining wind that sprang at the elms and shook them again and again like an angry dog. Longfellow Street, smothered in snow, seemed strangely white and deserted under a frosty moon. Back across the wide lawns the old houses loomed up bulky and silent with slits of light from under the drawn shades . . .

Mr. Blair's nose was stiff and red and his teeth chattered slightly when he spoke. 'A dis-disagreeable night, Mrs. Blythe,' he observed in a trailing, rather plaintive voice.

He had a fleeting thought of the Mediterranean, warm and blue under a fiery golden sun and flaring sky . . .

'Yes, indeed,' agreed Nellie, who never felt called upon to dispute a man's verdict.

They walked along in silence, their feet crunching through the hard snow, their breath hanging on the air like white smoke. The Coppertons' coupé came fumbling down the street, churning up a mist of whiteness on either side. A holly wreath, speckled with berries, swung and bobbed about in the back window. 'Oo — Christmas!' thought Nellie, like a little girl.

As they approached number nine she became conscious of an increasing tenseness in Mr. Blair's manner. He rumbled nervously once or twice, started to say something, and then apparently decided not to. Nellie wondered if he wished to speak to her about Joan; he had done so several times before when particularly distressed or puzzled, and she had always been very happy to give him the benefit of her wider experience. 'Well, with *my* little girl . . .' she would say. And Mr. Blair was always very impressed and grateful.

He escorted her in silence to the steps of the Earls' veranda, and then stopped short with an air of anxious resolution. 'Ahem!' he began firmly, his doggy eyes fixed with a steadfast light upon the topmost branches of the waving elms. 'There is a little matter, or, to be precise, a rather large matter, my dear Mrs. Blythe, about which I should like to speak to you.'

'Won't you come in?' asked Nellie, tapping the snow off her rubbers.

'No — please, I assure you,' he protested in a sudden flurry of nervousness. 'I shall not detain you for more than a moment. To be brief, the matter I wish to . . . or rather . . .' He paused to get a fresh grip on himself, and then proceeded again very rapidly: 'To be precise, my dear Mrs. Blythe, I do not like to see a lady of your refinement, your — er —

accomplishments, forced to — shall we put it crudely? — work for her living.' He paused, took a long breath, and then was off again, his eyes still set on the top of the dim, waving trees.

'As you are aware, I have a daughter — a difficult child. I do not feel that I am properly qualified to give her the attention she requires, and yet I feel responsible for her well-being. You see my point, I believe?'

Nellie nodded vaguely.

Mr. Blair's manner now became exceedingly strained and deliberate. He surveyed the elms with critical interest, his hands clasped tightly behind his back, his nose very red and a trifle moist. 'Therefore, my dear madam,' he said resolutely, 'therefore, taking all things into consideration, I should deem it an honor, a privilege, if you would marry me.'

Nellie stood very still, suddenly unconscious of the sting of the wind. A shocked, almost frightened look swept across her face. 'Oh, dear, oh, dear . . .' she thought with a little tumble of words. Her hands were locked tightly together in her muff . . .

The moments grew silently into a minute. Nellie wanted to cry out, 'No — no — *no!*' to Mr. Blair, cry it out loudly and decisively — loudly, like a trumpet, so Roger would hear. But something seemed to be clamping her tongue . . . like lead . . . like lead . . .

Mr. Blair coughed delicately, and for the first time his eyes met hers. 'Of course, my dear Mrs. Blythe, I do not expect you to give your answer immediately. You will require time to consider. I quite realize that, *quite*.' There was evidently something more he wished to say. He struggled with it for a moment. And then, 'I should like you to know,' he said quietly, painfully, 'that it would make me very happy, *very*.' He turned abruptly and walked away.

Nellie stood motionless in the path between white walls of snow, confusion sweeping through her. 'Oh, dear, oh, dear!' she thought over and over again . . . Suddenly she realized that she was very cold, almost numb. She stumbled up the steps and opened the door.

The children were in the dining-room doing their school lessons — Bryce lounging over his books and Justine reciting something of Kipling's in a loud, dramatic whisper.

Nellie leaned against the doorway and watched them, her children — and Roger's children . . .

Valerie-Maud, seated tearfully in a corner, began to whine over her geography.

'Shut up, Val,' ordered Justine in exasperation. 'If you interrupt me once more, I'll come over and bite you — I *love* biting people!'

Valerie-Maud looked slightly startled. 'I don't believe you,' she said, skepticism tinged with alarm.

Justine glowered at her. 'Don't you, then! Well, you ought to see the girl who sat next to me in school at home. Say! her whole arm was full of holes where I'd bitten her through. So there!'

Valerie-Maud was visibly impressed . . .

Nellie walked softly across the hall without disturbing them. She didn't want to talk to the children just now. Later, perhaps, but not now. She wanted Winnie — dear, faithful Winnie, who always sympathized and always understood.

Winnie was out in the kitchen pressing Justine's new blue dress with the little lace ruffles and glazed buttons. 'Why, hello, darling!' She looked up in surprise, wiping back her damp hair with a backward movement of the arm. 'I didn't hear you come in.'

Nellie sat down quickly. 'Winnie,' she said helplessly, 'Mr. Blair has asked me to marry him . . .'

Mrs. Earl turned off the iron with a brisk movement and

came and sat down beside her. 'I know.' She nodded. 'I've seen it coming.'

Nellie held her hand tightly. 'What shall I do?' she asked. 'Oh, Winnie, what shall I do?'

Mrs. Earl looked very serious, very thoughtful. 'It would be nice,' she said slowly, after a pregnant pause. 'Nice for him — and the children — and the little girl. If you felt you could do it, darling, if you felt . . .'

'I don't know,' said Nellie sharply. 'There's Roger . . . Roger . . .'

They both sat very still. The clock with the picture of the lady in its middle sounded loudly from across the hall. Justine's new blue dress hung over the edge of the ironing-board, its ruffles nearly sweeping the floor . . .

Two words were hammering through Nellie's head: Roger — nice — Roger — nice — She tried to shut one of them out, to stifle it, crush it; but it came back louder and more insistent: nice — nice — She forced herself to think of Roger . . . to think of Roger flying out over the falls, tall and slim and gay . . . That old broken feeling gripped her again briefly, for a moment, and then Roger grew dim and far away like a dream — a beautiful dream. Nice — nice — came the thought, stealing back over her softly, insidiously. Nice for him, for the children, for the little girl Joan. And for her, too. Oh, very nice for her. No more nagging fears of the future; no more daggers of fear pricking her happiness. But peace, security, a home — a home on prosperous, tranquil Longfellow Street, under sheltering elms and bound about with thick, soft lawns. How nice, how blessedly nice! Slow tears seeped from beneath her white lids and dripped into her lap unheeded . . .

'Somehow,' said Winnie, very gently, very carefully, 'somehow, I think that Roger would like it, dear — to have you all safe and provided for. I think perhaps it would make him happy . . .'

Nellie sat quiet. Yes, Roger would want her to be safe, to be comfortable. Roger had always been so kind. And the children . . . He would want Justine to have a home, to have chances, pretty things. Later on Justine would need pretty things, lacy and fluffy — when she grew older and went out to meet people. All girls needed pretty things . . .

She held Winnie's hand tightly in hers, and pieced her thoughts together as if they were a cardboard puzzle. Roger, who had always been so clever and careless and free, would understand. He had always understood — sometimes more than she had wanted him to. And now he would understand this. He would know that she was doing it for him . . . for the children . . . so that Justine might have a home and chances and pretty things . . . It wouldn't be disloyal — he would know that — only wise and natural and human. Just part of the plan; a new and gracious unfoldment. Why, Roger . . . Roger would be *glad!*

Nellie looked up at Winnie and smiled, her long lashes curling back damply. 'You always help me, dear,' she said gratefully. 'Always, Winnie . . .'

3

Nellie and Mr. Blair were married in the Earls' parlor on the first day of March.

Because of what were referred to obliquely as 'certain things' (presumably the late Mr. Blythe and the late Mrs. Blair), the ceremony was very quiet and select with only the Earls, the children, Mrs. Grosslap, and a remote relative of the bridegroom's present.

Winnie spent nearly a week's housekeeping money for roses and white carnations. They were everywhere — by the windows, over the mantel, in all sorts of little odd jars and vases. 'How beautiful!' cried Nellie when she saw them. 'Oh, how beautiful!' with blue eyes very wide and bright. (She was glad it was March — too early for lilac . . .)

Just before lunch the little girl Joan knocked at the door with her arms full of pussywillows. 'Perfectly sweet!' twittered Winnie. She put the pussywillows in the hall where it was rather dark . . .

By half-past three all was ready in complete and final glory. The parlor was swimming in sunshine and heavy with flower-sweetness; the dining-room table was criss-crossed with white ribbons and dotted with mounds of cream-cakes and golden macaroons and quivering jellies, amber and lemon and emerald, and little crisp salads on paper-lace mats, and sparkling with frosted punch glasses and the Earls' wedding silver. Winnie was so pleased and excited over it that she forgot to change her shoes and never realized that she had gone through the entire affair in her old cracked slippers until seven o'clock in the evening, at which time she wept profusely and irrationally laid the blame on Hector.

Mrs. Grosslap, who had insisted upon coming, sat in a corner and sniffed semi-audibly, the thick white powder on her cheeks streaked with rivulets of tears. In honor of the occasion she wore all three of her wedding rings (Mr. Ripply having not yet made his contribution to the general collection) and huge, dangling ear-ornaments which looked rather like chandeliers on a small scale. Every time she moved these clanked and rattled emptily and made the minister, who was of a somewhat timid nature, lose his place in the prayer-book.

The Remote Relative, a bald, pink little gentleman with prominent, pear-shaped ears, blew his nose every few minutes with a tremendous blast of noise. He had come because he possessed a peculiar fondness for witnessing marriages, funerals, and other ceremonies and events of importance. Some day, when business affairs and a dogmatic wife became less pressing, he intended to write a novel, and at present he was collecting data for the momentous event — 'human interest stuff' he called it a trifle inelegantly. He carried a

little notebook about with him wherein he jotted down the outstanding features of each function he attended. These entries were brief and very much to the point, such as: 'Bride topples over as she enters church. (Emotion or high heels? Think this out.)'; and 'Young child cries "Papa" as coffin lowered into grave. (Fine opportunity for pathos.)' The Remote Relative prided himself on his dexterity at procuring these poignant tid-bits.

Hector stood in the doorway making valiant efforts to refrain from unholy giggling, his face red and moist with the prolonged strain. (He frequently experienced the same acute anguish in church during prayers.) He kept close to the door in case his control should give way suddenly . . .

Winnie, excited and elated, her long nose working as usual, hovered about Nellie with admiring concern. 'You're so calm, darling, I don't see how you . . . *really* I don't!' Her whispers made little flurries of sound in the warm, flower-heavy room.

Nellie smiled serenely. She was feeling very happy and very composed as if all her thoughts had been carefully rearranged and labeled and stacked in neat little piles. 'If Roger were to come in here this instant,' she was thinking, 'I wouldn't be ashamed. He would understand . . . Roger would understand . . .' She thought of Roger all through the ceremony; somehow it helped.

Mr. Blair appeared to be intensely unhappy. He rocked back and forth on his toes in an agony of nervousness, his damp hands clasped tightly behind his back. From time to time he made queer, rumbling noises in his throat, and then blushed furiously when he realized that they were coming from him. Only Mr. Blair's eyes spoke of something deeper than embarrassment . . .

The children stood together in a row against the wall under a fragrant arch of roses and carnations. Winnie had grouped them there, after a great deal of preliminary posing,

and she felt that the effect was very sweet, what with the sun and the flowers and all.

Bryce, the tallest of the line, looked interested, but not particularly impressed. It seemed rather foolish to him — this marrying of elderly people with children. But it was their business, not his; and it probably wouldn't make much difference, anyhow. A nice, friendly little man; nothing to be afraid of . . . Bryce took life very casually and smoothly.

Next to him Justine stood stiff and erect, an expression of withering scorn cut into her white face. Back in that day of early January Nellie had talked to her gently, a new, warm note in her voice: 'You see, darling, it is going to be so lovely for us all; Mamma won't have to work any more now, or worry any more; and you and Bryce will have a nice home again . . .' She had gone on and on, blind to the fury and pain in Justine's eyes. 'I know we are all going to be so happy together, right next door to dear Aunt Winnie. It will just be a new home, darling, and a new little sister, and somebody else in dear Papa's place for you ——'

Justine had stopped her there. 'In Roger's place — in Roger's place!' There was something from the core of Justine's heart in that cry; a swift and terrible revulsion. She stormed at Nellie, bitterly and violently, her green eyes blazing and her voice hoarse and passionate. She threatened to run away; to shoot Mr. Blair; to burn up his rotten old house — anything, everything, in a raging hurricane of words. 'It's little, *little* . . . how can you do it! Oh, how can you do it! . . . you're just afraid, you're *little* . . .' On and on until she was burning and trembling all over.

And when Nellie tried to touch her, to pat her with fluttering white hands, she stumbled up to her room and crouched there by the window — the little bent picture of Roger held tightly to her heart.

But that was just at first. Afterwards Justine grew scornful and mocking, and laughed at Mr. Blair with a cold, hard

glint in her eyes that disquieted Nellie. A little man trying to take Roger's place — a contemptible, stuttering little man — a dwarf beside Roger.

Under the fragrant wave of roses and carnations, Justine nudged Bryce and mimicked Mr. Blair's unhappy nervousness. She coughed and rolled her eyes beseechingly, clasping and unclasping her hands in mock anguish. Bryce snorted appreciatively; and Winnie frowned from across the room.

Valerie-Maud leaned up against the wall and observed with rapt attention every detail of the service. *This* was how people got married. *This* was how she would get married — only hers would be much nicer, of course, much grander, with a long lacy veil and diamonds and more flowers and quarts of perfume squirted over everything, and twenty or thirty bridesmaids in pink silk dresses, and thousands and thousands of people in the church all clapping their hands and cheering her and saying how beautiful she looked, and seven or eight ministers done up prettily with roses in their buttonholes to see to the business end of it, and the street outside all covered with beautiful red carpet, and policemen, nine deep, standing along the sidewalk to keep the common people off her, and a tremenjus Salvation Army Band and plenty of hand-organs to make it lively . . . Oh, but hers would be a wedding!

Joan, looking very small and brown at the end of the line, watched it all a little puzzled. Why did they have to stand so long in this hot, important room? And why had they killed so many flowers? Pussywillows lasted — you put them in jars, blue ones, and they lasted and lasted. But roses didn't; they fell away in lovely little flakes, and curled up. All these roses would fall away . . . the room would be full of them, like snow . . .

She looked about for the pussywillows. Where had Mrs. Earl put them? She pulled Valerie-Maud's skirt. 'Where are the pussywillows?' she asked softly.

'Keep quiet, you silly little thing. They're getting married!' in a carefully modulated whisper.

Joan sighed. Yes, of course; they were still getting married — she knew all about *that*. Aunt Nellie and Father had explained — but mostly Aunt Nellie, because she liked to explain. She set her legs farther apart and sighed again, somewhat louder. 'Say, Val, are they nearly finished?'

'Shut up, crazy!' hissed Valerie-Maud.

Joan moved away from her quickly. 'If you pinch,' she warned with clear emphasis, 'I'll pinch back!'

Winnie's face lapsed into one vast frown — and Hector disappeared suddenly from the doorway . . .

Joan ambled along the wall and sat down behind the minister, from which point she could get a more interesting view of the ceremony. She could watch the white lady in black who was having such a nice time being unhappy. Also, she could look out of the window; far, far out to a wide, windswept sky. That was lovely . . .

It was all over at last, and Winnie rushed up and kissed Mrs. Blair warmly and emotionally. 'Oh, I'm so glad, darling, *so* glad!' she exclaimed, tears in her eyes. And she was, too! She sat down in Hector's armchair and wept from sheer joy.

Mrs. Grosslap advanced slowly, a damp handkerchief held to her quivering lips. 'My dear,' she began limply, 'I trust all will be well with you. But the Lord Giveth and the Lord taketh away. We must always be Prepared . . .' She shook hands with every one and passed out of the room, her earrings clanking emptily.

The Remote Relative approached and tendered his congratulations. He was rather disappointed. This particular ceremony had yielded nothing very interesting, nothing of great dramatic value. Of course the row of children was somewhat unusual; but since they weren't labeled, it was impossible to say to whom they belonged. He refused, a

little peevishly, to stay for refreshments, and trotted out of the room, his prominent, pear-shaped ears pink with the heat.

The room was full of Winnie's chatter and the scraping of chairs that were being carried across the hall by Hector whose intentions were somewhat superior to his efficiency. Nellie was flushed and bright-eyed and very happy. When Bryce came over and kissed her, she said, 'Oh, isn't it *nice*, darling?' in a bubbling-up sort of voice as if she had just had a present — a present of peace.

Justine still leaned against the wall, her face white and hard. Nellie smiled at her brightly and waved her hand. 'Aren't you coming to kiss Mamma, dear?' she asked.

Justine tilted back her head slowly. 'No,' she said. And then she walked out of the room and up the stairs with that scornful, mocking air that no one understood.

'Never mind, dearest,' whispered Winnie hastily. 'She's excited, you know. Children are like that . . .'

But Nellie's gayety had faded out. She sat down quietly beside Mr. Blair and took Joan on her knee. She ruffled her fingers through the shining, leaf-brown hair. 'Well, you funny little girl — you funny brown little girl . . .'

Joan was silent a moment. She wasn't quite sure what she ought to do. What *did* people do at weddings? Perhaps it was like Christmas, or a birthday — something very special and lovely. Yes, that must be it! She gave a relieved smile at Aunt Nellie, a slow, sweet smile that shone out quietly from her gray eyes first, and then flickered across her face.

'Many happy returns of the day,' said Joan in her surprisingly deep voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

It was in the spring of the year, in the last of a drenched and shining April, that Joan first ran away. Only, as she carefully and patiently explained to Nellie, it wasn't *really* running away. It was just a game; in brief, it was Groggles, 'the happiest one of them all.'

Nellie couldn't quite see the distinction. One might call it this or call it that; it *was* running away. A *fact* — inescapable.

'Now I must be kind, but firm,' she reflected, brushing up once more on her stock ideas regarding the discipline of very young children. 'Kind, but firm!' with a thoughtful, conscientious little pucker between her puzzled eyes . . .

And because Nellie's conception of a suitable punishment was simple and somewhat limited, Joan was put to bed at half-past two in the afternoon (a very *lovely* afternoon, which gave the proceeding its point), with a bread-and-milk supper to follow.

While the small culprit was being undressed, Justine hung over the top of the banisters giving mutters of sympathy and sucking a slab of licorice. Justine was planning to run away herself, but she hadn't yet decided whether it should be westward or seaward. On the one hand there was the enthralling prospect of mingling freely, and without parental pats, among Indians and cow-punchers and odds and ends of bandits. But on the other hand there were Mr. Masefield's poems! 'Oh, I must go down to the sea again . . . To the lonely sea and the sky,' Justine would chant, her eyes as green as the tumbling jade surf. 'Ateed-lee-dum, ateed-lee-dum' (because she always forgot some part of it), 'And a star to steer her by.'

Due to the persuasive Mr. Masefield she was beginning to sway a trifle on the side of the tossing deep. When she was off by herself she practiced saying 'Dammit!' and 'What the hell!' in a gruff, swaggering tone, because sailors were probably a free-and-easy lot with little use for grammar and manners . . .

She leaned over the top of the banisters and muttered sympathetically and a trifle absently.

At supper-time Nellie explained the affair to Mr. Blair. 'It distresses me to have to do it,' she said earnestly. 'But really! off by herself five hours — without letting us know a word! Such a really *queer* thing. And she wouldn't tell me anything. Just a *game!* You quite understand it, William, don't you?'

(Mr. and Mrs. Blair were always hoping that they understood one another. Polite and just a little bit anxious: 'You *do* understand, don't you?')

Mr. Blair nodded (as usual) to imply that he understood perfectly.

'Do you think that I ought to — er — spank her?' he questioned delicately.

'Oh, dear, no!' exclaimed Nellie. Spankings were so crude; firm, perhaps, but not at all kind.

Mr. Blair looked relieved. If called upon to spank, he was a little doubtful as to how he should go about it. He had a vague and hazy idea that one spread the victim flat on its stomach and whacked energetically at a certain portion of its anatomy. There his knowledge ceased, while his experience didn't even have a beginning.

Upstairs in the little side bedroom Joan was lying flat on her back, comfortably propped about with pillows, with the window, like a long picture framed in white, hanging before her.

She was watching the Robinson Family in the elm tree outside. Such fine birds, and very beautiful; although perhaps not quite so interesting as the ducks in Trenton Pond. The ducks were so *real* — like people, sometimes just exactly like people. The mother one made you think of Mrs. Currie next door with her quacky, worried sort of voice and the way she collected all the little Curries when it was time for them to be fed.

But the ducks were really the nicer because they did such lovely, exciting things. The little Curries were pleasant enough — but they couldn't all stand on their heads in the water and come up eating things!

Joan longed intensely to be able to stand on her head in the water — in the cool, silver-streaked water of Trenton Pond with its thick, floating lily pads and bulging green buds. Perhaps on the next Groggles she would try it; very quietly and slowly so as not to disturb the ducks . . .

The next Groggles would be soon, of course, because this was April, and no time in all the year was quite so lovely as April. It was too bad Aunt Nellie didn't understand about it — but that was one of the things you had to get used to. You went away and had a beautiful time, and then after a while you came back and spent the afternoon in bed.

But it was worth it — oh, my, yes! With all the world breaking open with loveliness, and the woods beyond the pond full of warm sweetness and pale floating leaves like green butterflies asleep on the air . . . A thousand times worth it when every new night brought in hundreds of flowers — flowers a faint, cool pink like the sky very early in the morning, and white like the moon, and yellow, warm and thick, the color of a hot, hot day . . . Whole drifts of flowers everywhere — everywhere — Oh, a thousand times worth an afternoon in bed!

At half-past four Justine strolled into the room and offered comfort and sustenance in the form of two currant

cakes, hastily buttered, and a strip of rose-and-white ham wrapped about a pickle.

'I stole them,' she declared with a certain satisfaction.

Joan ate them all up together, reclining comfortably on her back, her knees making a white tent of sheet in the middle of the bed.

At half-past five Nellie arrived with the tag-end of the punishment—bread and milk. 'It really distresses Aunt Nellie,' she said several times in an earnest, pained voice. 'But you were such a naughty, naughty little girl that Aunt Nellie has to do it . . .' She rustled out again through the doorway, trying to look very distressed. Joan could see her fluttering along the dim hall and then dipping suddenly down the stairs — like a plump lavender butterfly in a hurry for its nectar.

Outside the white ruffled window April turned suddenly capricious. A heavy mist of blue-gray unrolled across the sky, and all down the street shutters and doors and trees began to creak and bang, and whole hordes of daffodils were caught swaying in the wind, swaying and swirling under the shadow of the storm . . . Waves of coolness flowed into the room, April-coolness, shower-coolness.

Joan sat up in bed, a bowl of bread and milk in her lap. She piled all the bread to one side and tipped the milk to the other, and then surveyed the result thoughtfully. Now what sort of game could you play with this . . . A brief space of reflection. Of course! The milk could be the Red Sea, and the little pieces of bread the poor Children of Israel. The crusty one was Moses.

Now for the game! The Children were all standing on the shore wondering and wondering how they were *ever* going to get across the water, because it was too deep to wade and they couldn't swim on account of whales and things. And in the distance they could hear the guns of their terrible enemies. (She banged on the side of the bed for the enemies.)

And the poor Children were dreadfully upset, and they all began to cry and cry. (She banged on a different part of the bed for the Children.) And just across the sea was the lovely Promised Land where it was always April, and the poor Children didn't know how they could ever get to it. So they just cried louder and louder — like the little Curries when they were spanked. But (she eyed the bread triumphantly) the Lord heard the noise and decided to help them out!

She leaned over the bowl, utterly absorbed, her right arm held high above her head. (The Lord in the form of the spoon) shot down suddenly from the heavens, gathered up an armful of the weeping Children and bore them swiftly to the Land of April (the pillow) wet and soggy, but otherwise unharmed. He had to make several trips, but at last they were all rescued, and only one was in any way damaged. (He, unfortunately, fell to pieces in the excitement of landing.) The Children of Israel sat meekly on the smooth slopes of the Promised Land, musing upon this sudden trend of events.

Joan heaved a sigh of satisfaction; and then, with the aid of the erstwhile Deity, she put the Children back into the Sea and ate them with relish!

2

Mr. Blair received a great deal of mail; all kinds of mail — long, creamy envelopes with rows of pink stamps, square, shiny ones, big and little and bulky and slim. He never opened them and chatted over the contents at breakfast as Nellie was wont to do.

('Oh, William, just listen to this! Mr. Edwin Tucker — he used to live next door to Mrs. Landor, Winnie's Mamma, you know — has had a poem accepted by "The Star-Beam Magazine." It s a sweet name, but I've never heard of it before, have you? And — oh, dear, dear, dear!

Poor Mildred Picklebaum has had *another;* that makes seven, or — let me see — yes, *seven* . . .'

Mr. Blair never did that. He opened his mail in the privacy of his own room, and rarely spoke of it to any one. 'Travel circulars, travel catalogues,' he explained briefly and casually. 'I send for them. They — er — assist me in planning my tour; also, they make very interesting reading, *very.*'

'How nice!' said Nellie brightly. 'Well, now, isn't that nice!' She seemed always to keep on hand a number of such remarks — little strings of words saying nothing in particular, but saying it with a note of wifely commendation.

Upstairs in the front bedroom there was a low, wide shelf stocked with neat piles of travel circulars, an accumulation of many years' standing, frayed and thumbed like well-loved books.

Sometimes at night, when the house was very dark and still, when Nellie lay quiet and inert, her blond hair in two plump braids and her mouth lax and slightly open, Mr. Blair would perch on the ottoman by the window and go over some of these very slowly and caressingly, his thin legs dangling onto the floor. He would brood over the pages, turning them softly, and by and by his shoulders would begin to sag and a great wonder and a great glory would roll out before him, filling the dim room, shattering the room . . . a panorama of the Orient . . . an eternity of beauty . . .

There was the Mediterranean, a hot glorious blue with golden sands and strange, moon-white buildings rising in tiers from green slopes; and India, spired and domed and throbbing with temple bells, India against the snowed masses of the Himalayas under a burning copper sun. And Japan, delicate and wistful, dripping with cherry blossoms and wistaria; with the loveliness of Fujiyama shadowing exquisite lacy gardens; and everywhere parasols, fragile and vivid like swaying flowers. And the dim, remote majesty of

Egypt; old, old Egypt with its lonely desert lands and winding Nile; Egypt with its pyramids — the wonderful, splendid, unbelievable pyramids towering into a blazing eastern sky . . .

Mr. Blair, hunched on the edge of the ottoman in a long cotton nightshirt, would grow drunk with the beauty and wonder of it all. He would say the names slowly, whisperingly, to himself; lovely melodious names that sounded like old chimes: Marmora, Tonegawa, Benares, Ægean, Hondo, Adriatic, Arabia . . . Over and over in a low, half-crooning voice: Marmora, Tonegawa . . . Enchanted, singing words, and enchanted worlds aflame with warmth and wonder and color. Blue seas and bluer skies; slow, muffled temple bells, old and mellow and infinitely sweet . . . Marmora, Tonegawa . . .

Mr. Blair would sit very still, beautiful, strange words chiming through him and through him. And the moon would float past the window in a mist of silver — a dream-moon in a mist of dreams.

Occasionally Mr. Blair would speak to Nellie about these things, stiffly and a little offhandedly as if they were of casual interest to him like Wedgwood china or black pearls. He would watch her face intently to see if she were laughing at him, to see if the faintest hint of amusement were skimming back of her eyes.

But Nellie — arranging daffodils in blue bowls, clipping verses out of the 'Ladies' Home Journal,' rocking slowly and rhythmically with her lap full of frothing muslin and laces — never laughed. Somehow she would never have thought of laughing. It seemed a trifle odd for any one to be so wrapped up in the idea of travel; odd, but scarcely funny. And, after all, it was broadening. And doubtless the Orient was a very pretty place, although terribly warm and smelly, they said — and of course full of foreigners . . . (Nellie had a vague suspicion of all foreigners, especially

Italians, because a fruit vendor had once sold her an incomplete dozen of tangerines! 'I don't believe we should be unkind to them, dear — only careful,' she would advocate in her high, earnest voice. Winnie, from the depths of prejudice, considered that exceedingly broad-minded. 'It's so sweet of you, darling, and with them so greasy and all. I don't see how you do it, really and truly . . .')

'There is a thing called the Taj Mahal,' Mr. Blair would say, folding and refolding his handkerchief into a neat little square. 'In India — all white with a long pool in front of it. Lovely and — all white . . .'

'Well, now, *isn't* that interesting!' from Nellie with never-failing sprightliness. 'Really *most* interesting, dear.'

A drift of silence between them, and then:

'Some day,' Mr. Blair would tell her, so carefully casual, 'some day, when time and affairs permit, I shall take a vacation, a very long vacation. I anticipate it with extreme pleasure . . .'

And Nellie would nod pleasantly, and place the daffodils against the old copper plate above the mantel, or ruffle a strip of fine, frost-patterned lace along her shining needle . . .

There was always a polite, but nevertheless definite, understanding that Mr. Blair, at such time as should prove expedient and altogether proper, should take this vacation *alone*. Nellie accepted the implication agreeably and without much questioning. After all, William had been wonderfully kind to them, wonderfully considerate. He had placed her high and far above those old chilling sweeps of fear; he had given her Longfellow Street, had made her life a part of its gracious peace and mellowed, tranquil beauty. She was very grateful to William.

Sometimes, especially in the cool, calm evenings, with an April moon, very slim and lovely, slung over the topmost branch of the tallest elm, her gratitude would be so great that it would spill over into little trickles of affection. Dear

William! with his brown, doggy eyes and his thin, precise voice. It would be very nice for him — later on — to have a vacation. It would do him good; vacations always did people good . . .

Mr. Blair, after one or two disconcerting experiences, never spoke of the Orient before Justine. He was, in some indefinable fashion, afraid of Justine — afraid of those mocking green eyes and whips of laughter. At first he had tried to ignore her rudeness and to smooth away her dislike with little gifts and kindnesses. Nellie had hovered round him, watching and saying pleased, bright things: 'How generous you are, William! Justine, darling, isn't Uncle William generous to us all!' And every time she spoke Justine's lips tightened and her eyes flashed scornfully at these bids for her favor. Nellie never noticed; but Mr. Blair did. He saw his gifts and his kindnesses pushed back with both hands, pushed back derisively, and laughed at. So after a while he stopped offering them — and after a while he grew afraid of Justine because she knew so unerringly how to hurt him . . .

One Saturday after lunch he heard her outside the dining-room window on the shadow-printed lawn. She was giving an impromptu entertainment before Joan and Valerie-Maud and the various little girls of the neighborhood whom she ruled with a rod of iron and a great deal of beguiling vivacity. 'Bossy,' the little girls called her in private, but they obeyed her all the same with a fearful and terrified delight. After all, there was a certain dark fascination in never knowing if you were going to be hugged or punched for some stray word or deed!

Justine was prancing about in front of her vassals, Mr. Blair's felt hat crushed down onto her ears so that they tipped out grotesquely on either side of her pale, animated face.

'Hey, kids, watch! Here he is when he first sees India!'

She clasped her hands to her heart and staggered about in ecstatic circles. 'Oh, my India, my own best beloved! Gosh, but you're grand! Look at that little old pyramid, kids! Say, did you ever see a cuter pyramid! No, cried everybody, never, *never!*' She thumped her chest loudly with emotion, and all the little girls shrieked with mirth.

'Ho! ho! Say, you're funny, Justine! Say, isn't Justine funny!' Their remarks were flattering but monotonous.

'Hurray, hurray! Look what we've got here, if you please. Well, if it isn't Egypt. Did you ever see a nicer lookin' country? Sand, alligators, palms — just as the dear books said. I'm just palping all over with joy!" She gave a brief exhibition of palping. 'Now three cheers for the alligators! Three cheers for everything! Rah, Rah, Rah!' A last round of staggers amid thunderous applause.

'Do it again, Justine, do, do it again!'

'Something about Holland,' pleaded a little girl whose conception of the Orient was a trifle confused; 'please, please Justine . . .'

Justine started off again with obliging gusto, her voice becoming shrill with the prolonged effort.

Joan, lying on her back in the grass with spring sunshine sifting over her, stared up and up for a hundred leagues through the fluttering jade of the old elm. 'He has pictures,' she mused in a casual, conversational tone. 'He has lots and lots of pictures because they make him happy . . . and they make him happy because he loves them . . .'

Valerie-Maud giggled and nudged Millicent Currie. 'Joan's talking to herself again!' she observed. 'Isn't she a crazy little thing!'

Inside, behind a screen of curtains, Mr. Blair was flaming with anger. 'I'll thrash her!' he gritted; 'I'll thrash her!' But he didn't.

Deep down under his careful shell of dignity and impor-

tance, he was hurt, very hurt, as if a lovely thing had been crushed before his eyes . . . as if a dream had been broken.

3

THE next Groggles took place in May; it was bound to. Such a flowery, shining May, very nearly the loveliest time of all; April's elder sister, a little less capricious and a little richer in color and fragrance and song.

Joan got up early in the morning when the house was still dim with the last shreds of darkness. Before leaving, she wrote a note to Aunt Nellie in a large, slightly wobbly hand: 'I am going away to play. I will come back.' And then, after a moment's consideration, 'I am very sorry,' which was quite true in one way, but not at all so in another!

She left by the side door because it was easy to unfasten and didn't squeak uproariously like the others. Outside it was all silent and beautiful, a silver-gray morning with sheets of mist and leafy things everywhere dripping with dew. And over the world a great wide sky, very cool and pale . . .

Joan raced down Longfellow Street, her bare feet making sharp flaps of sound in the quietness. At the corner she met the milk-wagon, very yellow and gay.

'Hello!' said the milkman. 'And where are *you* going?'

'Hello!' said Joan. 'I'm going to play, thank you.'

Then off round the corner and down Wimble Street that started its existence with big, majestic houses and passed into little houses, squat and chummy and far apart, and then at last reached the point where there were no houses at all — only a road skirted with trees and beyond that greenness and wonderfulness — the enchantment of May!

Joan ran for a long time and then lay out flat on somebody's front lawn to rest awhile, and then ran off again, flop-flopping down a gray and silent street. Up in the sky things were happening, beautiful things — streams of gold

and pink flowing into a great blue sea. A cool, pale light wavered over everything so that the gardens of the little houses far apart glistened with silver dew, and the apple trees were like great rose and white fountains spraying the earth with shining petals . . . Joan began to hum, low and deep inside at first, then a little louder. A casual, tuneless humming like the music of a pebbled brook.

When the street stopped being a street and became a country road with brown earth, damp and deeply rutted, she dropped into a dawdling gait, standing still every now and then to sniff things and watch things and love things . . .

Out toward a black pine grove there was another house, half-farm. She met a boy coming from it along the road. He was driving cows, big, glossy ones with little tinkling bells under their chins, flashing silver.

'Hullo,' said the boy.

'Hello,' said Joan. 'May I pat your cows?' She stood on tiptoe and patted them, each one individually so that none of their feelings would be hurt.

The boy watched her a little blankly. He was a nice boy with thick creamy hair and tanned skin the color of russet apples. 'Are you lost?' he asked.

'No,' Joan explained patiently, 'I am not lost; I am playing a game.'

The cows stamped about, spurring up the earth and looking very fine and impressive. The boy flicked at them with a long peeled stick, smooth and gleaming whitely against the great red-brown bodies. Joan watched him interestedly, her head tilted to one side . . .

'If you're hungry,' said the boy, 'go in there and ask Ma.' He indicated the farmhouse with a backward jerk of his thumb. And then he passed on down the road, flicking the stick against his dusty breeches . . .

After a moment's indecision Joan advanced toward the house, trailing her feet through the long, damp grass of the

bordering field. In the yard there were whole hordes of chickens. She sat down under an apple tree, chin cupped in hands, and watched them for a while — hordes of white chickens fluttering and wandering over the brown earth.

The sun was up now; gold was rushing and streaming across the world, filling the air, filling the apple tree so that it seemed to float in light. A billowing mass of rose and silver against a blue, blue sky. The earth smelt good— warm and damp. Joan wiggled her toes into it and a little worm came up and trickled across her leg. She made a hole for it under the apple tree and buried it carefully. Little worms were safer inside — then they didn't get mashed.

After a while she got up and approached the back door of the house amid a general flurry of chickens. Breakfast smells flowed out in waves upon the morning air. She stood on the steps and pressed her nose against the screening, sniffing like a small puppy. The little boy with the creamy hair and tanned skin came back across the yard and doused himself at the pump. It looked nice, so Joan came down and did it too. The water was sharp and cold and flashing, and a great deal of it went down her neck. She jumped up and down and laughed while the boy watched her blankly . . .

'Are you hungry?' he asked.

Enticing smells flowing out on the morning air . . . savory and pungent . . . Joan sniffed again. 'Yes,' she said. 'Can I please have breakfast with you?'

They walked in silence through the fluttering hordes of chickens, their feet pressing into the damp ground, pressing into pools of honey-colored sunshine . . .

Behind the screen door, that bulged hugely in the center as if somebody were in the habit of sticking his head into it, the kitchen was dim and sagging with heavy odors. Things like kettles and white plates and the dull silver of tin mugs gleamed out sharply; and other things, like people and chairs

and a long, black, snaky stovepipe, loomed through the mist of steam.

Every one in the room gazed at Joan with round, blank eyes.

'She wants some breakfast,' the boy explained.

'If you please,' Joan added politely. 'And I can eat anything but coffee.'

There was another slice of silence, full of astonishment. Then, 'Are you lost?' asked the woman at the stove, her voice curling up to a minor key.

'No, thank you,' very patiently. 'I am not lost; I am playing a game.'

Every one went one stage blanker, together, in perfect unison, as if a button had been pressed.

'Well — sit down,' said the woman. People swarmed hurriedly about the table. There seemed to be a great many of them, especially children. They cropped up all over the place, creamy-haired and tanned and very much interested . . .

Joan sat between an old lady with a thin, wispy face and thin wisps of hands, and the boy who had taken the glossy cows to pasture.

'Where do you live?' asked the woman, forking things out of a vast black pan with a good deal of hissing and sputtering.

'Number nine Longfellow Street — and can I have some bread, please?'

'Run away?' queried a bulky person from the other end of the table.

Joan paused before answering, and crinkled up her gray eyes thoughtfully. Was Groggles running away? Aunt Maura used to call it that, and Aunt Nellie did now. But really and truly it was different; a game — something very happy and lovely. It was the same and yet it was different — a rather perplexing affair.

'Not quite,' she decided at last, which answer plunged every one into an even deeper state of blankness.

The old lady was very kind. She cut up Joan's ham for her, and smiled a sweet, wispy smile . . . 'There, dearie, eat it all up. Ham is good for little girls, it makes them strong . . . and . . .' Her voice trailed off. It was a very old lesson.

Joan liked her. She was a nice old lady with her eyes full of memories and faded dreams . . .

The ham was greasy and sharp with salt, but she ate it all up, every little bit of it, to please the old lady. The milk in the squat tin mugs was warm and creamy with a froth of bubbles on top. Joan drank a great deal of it, while a row of round, astonished eyes regarded her unblinkingly.

After breakfast she sat on the steps outside the kitchen door and helped the old lady feed the fluttering hordes of chickens. It was fun flinging out handfuls of the grain like very tiny golden pebbles, smooth and polished. She pretended that she was an angel sitting on a puff of white cloud and throwing little golden dreams to the people on earth. Dreams of the sky . . . After a time the big, shallow pan was empty, and the angel fluttered back to heaven.

'They're the nicest chickens I've ever seen,' Joan declared. And the old lady grew all bright as if some one had turned on a light inside of her.

The woman and the bulky person stood behind them in the doorway.

'Longfellow Street, Joe. Number nine,' she said. 'Tell 'em she just come in on us, queer-like.'

A muffled reply rumbled up from the interior of the bulky person. He tramped ponderously across the room, unrolling his shirt-sleeves; while the woman trailed over to the greasy clutter of dishes in the gray sink . . .

Outside on the sunny steps Joan stood up suddenly. The old lady was fondling one of the white chickens, stroking it, whispering to it . . . pouring out her heart and her worn,

faded dreams . . . 'Becky, dear little Becky, there . . . there . . .' (And in a week, perhaps, the bulky person would wring poor Becky's neck, and the old lady would be shaken with bewildered pain.)

Joan bent down for a moment, her warm brown cheek pressing against white hair. 'I've had a lovely time, thank you,' she said softly. 'And I think your chickens are the nicest ones I've ever seen.'

Then she raced across the yard, past the pump with its battered, shining pail, past the frail, sweet apple tree dripping rose and silver, and out into the road again, bound for everything — and nothing at all. She ran swiftly and without pausing until she had rounded a half-moon curve and come upon a grassy, overgrown by-way trailing through a shadowed copse of birches and maples and pines . . .

The morning was wide awake now, with a clamor and chatter of birds pelting through the warm air, and, farther off in a tangle of green, the low, cluttering sound of a pebbled brook. The sky was cupped over a spring-bound world; a clear sky, blue and infinitely splendid, with a great fleet of sailing clouds away to the west . . .

Joan was caught fast in the wonder and loveliness of it all. She began to make up a little song out of something they read in church: 'Let the heavens rejoice . . . and let the earth be glad!' Oh, they were fine, happy words, singing words. And 'Let the field be joyful . . . and the little hills skip with joy . . .' She could remember only bits of it from here and there. But some day she would learn it all and sing it over and over so that she would never forget it again . . .

Let the field be joyful — the field be joyful! Yes, she would find the field and play in it, the field they read about. It would be full of buttercups, perhaps, lovely little golden buttercups like lighted candles. And it would be joyful . . . every little golden buttercup would be joyful. They would skip like the little hills, she and the buttercups.

Joan began to run again, swiftly, noiselessly, down a long, grass-grown trail, her head thrown back and the warm, sweet wind singing through her . . .

4

JUSTINE and Bryce and Mr. Blair scoured Longfellow Street from end to end: Justine with a lively sense of the dramatic, Bryce a trifle nonchalantly, and Mr. Blair with a worried bewilderment.

While they searched, Nellie fluttered up and down the front lawn unburdening herself to Winnie in a high, somewhat plaintive voice. 'Really, dear, what do you suppose she *can* do? I never heard of such a thing before; what makes her do it? Five hours last time; and she looked so — so sort of *happy* when she came back — not at all ashamed or hungry. Really, dear, *really* . . .'

Winnie was intensely sympathetic and highly mystified. Certainly Valerie-Maud (bless her!) had never been given to this sort of thing.

'There, there, darling,' she soothed. 'It'll be all right, you just see. She's probably just — just, well, never you mind, it'll be all right!' with a great air of forced assurance.

Secretly she was thinking: 'Poor, poor Nellie! She may be kidnapped, lost, run over, drowned, anything at all . . . Poor, dear Nellie!'

It was Justine who eventually slipped into the right track. Having made a swift and somewhat noisy survey of the immediate neighborhood, she turned down Wimble Street and encountered a little boy with creamy hair and a warm, tanned skin.

'Seen a small kid in a blue dress?' she inquired briefly.

'Say, yes! D'you know her?'

'Sister by marriage — where'd she go to?'

'She was down at our place and then she ran away again. Pa sent me up to tell her folks.'

'Say! Isn't she the limit!' exclaimed Justine cheerfully. 'Come on, let's go and look for her.'

They set off at a lively, swinging gait down the street, past the big houses and the little chummy houses far apart and on to the blossoming apple tree and the yard all aflutter with white chickens.

The creamy-haired family emerged in a body from the house and sat down on the sunny back steps to watch her with round, blank eyes.

Justine stared them over coolly. 'Which way did she go?'

'Off there.' The whole family indicated the direction with a vague sweep of their arms. After this demonstration they relaxed into blankness.

'A nice little girl,' added the old lady in her soft, wispy voice. 'A dear little girl . . .' She was holding a white chicken in the crook of her arm, stroking it fondly with thin, gentle fingers . . .

Justine thought she looked rather silly — sitting there cuddling a hen. She said good-bye to the group abruptly, and started off again on her own, swooping about the ground after footprints with an air of great importance and efficiency. An audience always cheered Justine!

Some way down the road, beyond a half-moon curve, she came to a path grass-grown and vaguely outlined through a grove of maples and birches and pines. It ran on briefly under a cool green sheet of shade, then dropped into a shallow brook and continued on the other side,with a thinning of trees and long, warm slashes of sunshine. Then, quite suddenly, it opened into a great wide field of buttercups . . .

Justine stood perfectly still at the end of the path, staring out over the waves of golden flowers, her green eyes narrowed in the quick flare of light.

'Well!' said Justine in a thunderstruck voice, merging on admiration. 'Well, my gosh! If you aren't the limit!'

Out in the field, in the wide, happy field, Joan was skipping and racing about in an utter abandon of joy — like an elf, swift and blithe, blown with the wind and brushed with a hundred thousand golden buttercups . . .

Under a fluttering maple tree, in a neat little pile, she had carefully deposited all her clothes.

Nellie was shocked and amazed when she heard it. 'Nothing on!' she repeated incredulously after Justine had recited her story with relish. 'But how — why ——' She was too overwhelmed to go any further. Never, in all her life, had she heard of a little girl who did such a thing — who danced about in an open field with nothing on.

She was seriously and deeply stirred. She talked it over with Winnie, her voice wavering with earnestness and perplexity.

Winnie was astounded. Certainly Valerie-Maud had never done anything like *this*. She felt exceedingly sorry for poor Nellie. 'It must be such a tremendous responsibility, darling. You can never tell what a child like that will do; why, anything, simply anything, might happen . . .'

'Oh, dear!' said Nellie limply. 'Oh, dear! Whatever shall I do, Winnie?'

Upstairs in her room Joan lay on her back, comfortably propped up with pillows. Oh, why did people have to do this? Why did they have to spoil things — beautiful lovely things that made you sing and dance with the great happiness of it all? What made them do it? She was coming back; she had promised to come back. Why — why?

That night in the blue spring twilight with its first golden stars, Nellie injected a new word into her stepdaughter's prayers.

'Oh, Lord,' asked Joan politely, 'please make me a good, wise, *pure* little girl.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

In early June the clump of lilac bushes at the back of the garden burst into a great mass of powdery violet bloom, cool and feathery and dense with fragrance. Through the daytime they blotted the garden with color, and after that, beyond sunset and dusk, they became dim, lonely fountains spraying the night with sweetness . . .

Joan loved them — the soft, blurred radiance of their flowers and the tiny, glossy leaves, all soaked and dripping with dew when she first came out in the morning.

'My, my, aren't they pretty!' Winnie would exclaim in a tone of conventional admiration. 'Such a nice smell and all, darling . . .' Winnie was very fond of nice smells — lilac and roast beef and carnations and little hot spice cakes and lamb stew. She came over with her huge, squeaky shears and cut some of the violet puffs for Hector's bureau. He never noticed them until she pointed them out, but after that he was very pleased . . .

Nellie didn't go very often to the back of the garden. While the bushes tumbled and surged with blooms, she tried not to look at them, tried not to think of them. Her thoughts were all like wayward little ships that had to be steered very carefully away from an undertow.

Lilacs held memories, sharp and cutting and bitterly lovely; each blurred and fragrant heart held tears and sudden poignancy. And the swift rush of sweetness in the deepening twilight was like a fan brushing old, old dreams to a tremulous life. Nellie was shaken and filled with pain when it came to her, and all the cheerful, normal things of life would yield to the low, sad call of the lilacs. For the lilacs were strong, they were weighted with memories — weighted

with strength. Their sweetness was Roger's breath, their blossoming somehow belonged to him . . .

One evening Nellie walked over to them, her white hands held to her heart. The garden was very silent . . . dim blue-gray with a wisp of silver moon caught in the tallest tree.

The lilacs loomed up darkly, burdened with fragrance. She reached out and put her hands into them — so soft, so cool. Feathery blooms lay on her wrists; little leaves brushed across her face like the tips of fingers, light and gentle . . .

Then Nellie turned and saw Justine beside her. She, too, had come at the call of the lilacs. Her face was white against them, white and wet. 'She has been crying,' thought Nellie. 'She has been crying ——' And suddenly something sprang out between them; a gulf was bridged, a great void filled.

Justine's face gleamed pale through the dusk like a white flower. And Nellie's whole being was shaken with love for her, new and tremulous. She felt close to Justine, close — close — as they had been once in a far-off age. The lilacs had swept away all barriers; the lilacs had brought them into an old, sweet unity.

And suddenly Nellie began to cry, softly at first, then louder with great tearing sobs that shook her from head to foot. 'Darling, come to Mamma. Justine — Justine come to Mamma . . .'

But Justine didn't. She ran away across the dark garden, under the shadows of trees, under the wisp of silver moon.

And the great gulf was unbridged again, and the strange, poignant moment gone like a dream. And by and by the lilacs wilted and the clumps of green bushes were without fragrance and without memories. And the moon swelled into completeness; and only the little breezes sighed, sometimes, for the things that are lost in the grave of the past . . .

2

Mr. Blair loved Bryce; every one did, but especially Mr. Blair. He never gave vent to his affection in the fond flutterings and endearments of Nellie, nor in the breezy comradeship of Justine. Something within him checked such expression — firmly and decisively, as it checked all other displays of deep feeling. But his love burned warmly, just the same, behind the fine veil of his reticence; and if Nellie only sensed it dimly, and Bryce only became conscious of it now and then, it was because their eyes were busy with exoteric and more tangible things. Joan watched, and saw it . . . and Justine . . .

When Mr. Blair led the conversation at the table, his voice and his glance had a way of veering, ever so delicately, round to Bryce's place. All his long and meticulous words seemed to shape themselves into something especially for Bryce — something which often became very intricate and rather dull, in spite of his efforts to invest it with interest. But however futile his words might prove, Mr. Blair's eyes spoke the real things, the secret things of his heart. He would talk about this, and ask about that, and all the while something quite different would be declaring itself silently in his eyes . . .

And Justine, across the table, would watch and laugh. This little man, this proper little man, how funny he was with his great dignity and his craze for the Orient and his glowing eyes! How funny to see him sitting there, so stiff and so upright, trying to fill Roger's place — trying to love Roger's son. How funny, and how hurtful, like something silly with a bitter core . . .

Sometimes after sundown, while the house was cooling off from the sultry summer heat, Mr. Blair would come down and sit beside Bryce on the front steps and show him a few of the travel circulars, drawing his attention to this and that, explaining a little every now and then in his careful, serious voice.

High and far above them the sky would be smeared with dimming coral, little smudges of color between the branches of the great elm that blocked the west, and stray wisps of it like blown flame across the cutting line of dark roof-tops. The pages, with their garish slashes of crimson and purple and green, and their extravagant captions cluttered with superlatives and italics, would be turned slowly, with a mere whisper of sound. And Mr. Blair's voice would rise and fall, very casual at first and then growing warm and faltering with the great wonder of it all . . .

'See Bryce, it's a bazaar — Cairo is full of them. They sell glazed pottery and silks — and things. There are streets and streets of them . . . and that is the Red Lacquer Bridge, red lacquer . . . and those, cryptomerias — sort of pines, I think ——' The soft whisper of a turning page. 'That palace has incense and gongs and carved gates, and more lacquer . . . walls of it . . . the Temple of the Second Moon . . . a roof of swinging lanterns . . . It sounds, it must be very — unusual.' (Unusual, *unusual*, when his heart and his eyes and his whole being was singing: 'Oh, wonderful and glorious! Oh, imperishable wonder and glory!')

Bryce rather enjoyed looking at the circulars. Egypt was fine, and India. 'I'd like to go there some day,' he remarked.

'Yes,' said Mr. Blair. 'Some day . . .'

And high and far above them the first gold star of the evening pricked through a blue infinity.

In two or three years Bryce was going to Harvard. Nellie was quite excited about it already. 'My son at Harvard,' or 'My dear boy at Harvard' — how impressive it would sound! And every one would be sure to exclaim, '*You* with a son at Harvard! Why, my dear Mrs. Blair, you don't look old enough, *really!*' And she wouldn't either; she wouldn't look nearly old enough!

Nellie's idea of college life was a trifle hazy. The young

men studied, of course, and had examinations and things called 'fraternities' and organized cheers and songs about 'the dear old Alma Mater.' And then, like Mrs. Grosslap's first husband, they were, it would seem, given to a certain amount of 'spreeing.' But after all, that was natural enough — simply the 'wild oats' they talked about in books. The young men settled down later on. 'After the oats, the harvest' — wasn't there something like that in the Bible?

Nellie didn't delve too deeply into the subject. Even in thought she always remained delicately aloof from anything that wasn't quite tasteful and nice . . .

She liked to think of Bryce as studying and singing and cheering — he had such a pleasant voice, and he would enjoy that sort of thing. So, indeed, would Justine — especially the cheering. But Nellie didn't feel that college was really essential for Justine.

She talked the matter all over with Winnie one morning while they were shelling peas out at the back by the tall shaft of sunflowers. Winnie had brought her peas across the garden in a great agate-colored basin, heaped high and spilling over. Crisp green pods that snapped when she pressed them, and let out a rapid stream of imprisoned jade balls . . .

Nellie pushed on the little rubber gloves that clung to her soft white hands as if they were glued. Winnie didn't wear gloves — there was no sense in pampering knuckles and freckles.

'I believe, dear, that boys require it, really require it.' Snap, snap, and a rattle of peas in two empty, shallow bowls. 'It's so deepening and broadening, don't you think so, Winnie?'

Mrs. Earl was a trifle skeptical. 'But how, darling — I think it's sweet and all for Bryce to go — but how?'

Nellie's creamy brow puckered thoughtfully. 'It's the outlook, dear. It gives one such a deep, broad outlook.' Snap, snap, and a little mound of greenness at the bottom of

each bowl. 'And it expands the mind — all the new ideas, you know . . .'

'Yes?' half question, half lingering doubt. 'But Valerie-Maud isn't going, Nellie. Somehow I can't quite feel that it's really necessary. Italian, now! What good would Italian be to her? I can't feel that it is *necessary!*' (Which was just as well, since Valerie-Maud's mind was not the sort which broadened and deepened with the incoming of new ideas; it merely became crowded.)

'Well, with girls it's different, dear, of course. And anyhow, every one says that it isn't so much what they learn from their studies as the School Life. That's the important thing; I've read it so often — the School Life!' By which was presumably meant the singing and the cheering.

Winnie made a little slide of her lap so that the empty shells cascaded onto the grass. 'Don't forget to put in a sprig of mint,' she reminded. 'It makes them twice as tasty.'

Nellie stroked off her rubber gloves. She felt just a trifle disconcerted. In Winnie's flat convictions were so often crystallized her own vague suspicions!

Bryce hadn't decided yet what he wished to do and be after college; Bryce didn't trouble himself about the future, even the immediate future. His thoughts rarely rose above the ridge of To-day. Just now and then there were brief, unpremeditated flights like the desire to visit Egypt and the sudden determination to try for a place on the Crimson Eleven when the time should come. After that was through with? Well, something colorful and eventful, anyway. Certainly not the drab round of office work. There was the stage or prospecting, even the management of a magazine . . . No end of jobs, really, that he could fit into, and grace, after a try or two.

Justine snapped up the idea of a stage career with relish. 'Say, you'd make an awful hash of it,' she told him candidly.

'You'd probably be the world's quaintest actor — Beautiful Brycie! — and we'd all be kept busy till midnight scraping the rotten eggs off you . . .'

'Darling . . .' Nellie's reprimand trailed loosely across the room.

'You think you're awfully funny, don't you!' stated Bryce loftily. (Somehow, all of Bryce's utterances were beginning to take on the tone of a definite, incontrovertible statement delivered from the depths of knowledge and padded about with rich experience! A full ripeness and opulence in this line was yet to be developed under the nurturing guidance of Harvard.)

Justine grinned good-naturedly. 'Well, wait and see! Every one will be perfectly miserable, except Valerie-Maud — and she'll love it. Say, pass me a chocolate — I want a hard one; press your thumb in, you can tell that way. Well, she'll sit in the front row center and every time you speak she'll wilt with excitement. And Aunt Win will say: "The dear child, she's *so* emotional (bless her!), just like her dear Papa; and her dear Papa got it from his dear Papa; and his dear Papa ——" Anyhow,' as a clinching afterthought, 'you'd be no good; you haven't got any what-d'you-call-it? — sex appeal.'

'Justine!' Nellie's voice again, suddenly filled out and rounded with consternation. (It was so difficult to curb Justine's indelicacy, so difficult to curb anything of Justine's — but especially her indelicacy.)

Nellie was surprised and a trifle disquieted at Bryce's stray allusions to stage and magazine. She had always supposed that he would, in due time, go into business. She had no definite idea as to what kind of business (she really didn't know exactly what kinds there were), but at any rate something stable and sensible and adequately remunerative. Like — well, Business!

The stage, of course, was out of the question; every one

would understand *that*. Bryce, too, when he came to seriously consider it. Nellie herself liked plays very much — especially sad, droopy ones that cheered up brightly, if illogically, five minutes before the final curtain. She would melt comfortably into her orchestra seat at a Tuesday matinee, a slim box of peppermint creams on her lap and the programme flattened carefully over it so that she could strain out the names of the characters as they made their entry. She always wept, large pearly tears that rolled down easily and left her blue eyes clear and unpuffed with curled-back lashes. She clapped, too; soft stroking pats of her plump hands that soon dwindled down into a smoothing of kid gloves . . .

William never accompanied her; he didn't care for plays. But Nellie did; she liked them very much, indeed. All the same, she didn't want Bryce to be an actor. The very thought of it rumpled up her composure. 'I don't want to criticize, dear, you understand that, don't you? But I *do* feel, I can't help feeling, that it isn't quite nice.'

'Certainly not!' agreed Winnie heartily. Winnie loved plays too. She was partial to comedies (but not bedroom ones) with plenty of clutter and dash and great globs of plain, solid, unmistakable humor. She would rock back and forth, back and forth, limp with appreciative laughter, her hat squashed in her lap and her toes curled in under the seat . . .

And Hector, perversely shorn of his mirth, would sit glumly beside her. Hector liked deep, sullen tragedy with moans and curses and a stage strewn with corpses. Once, in his youth, he had seen 'Hamlet' and enjoyed it very much — although he had broken down into hapless giggles at the appearance of the ghost! He often felt that if things had been just a trifle different here and there, he himself might have borne a noble part in some great tragedy — even if it had been the part of a corpse . . .

Valerie-Maud craved sentiment in her entertainment. She pretended that all the heroines were she and that all the heroes were Bryce. Once, a very long time ago, they had been Harold Currie; but now they were Bryce entirely and conclusively. When the end of the play came and the hero swept the heroine into his arms and muttered, 'My darling Rosamund' (or Pearl or Violet or Gwendolyn) in a voice throbbing as mechanically as a street-car engine, Valerie-Maud was moved to tears of rapture. She would walk home in a happy daze, and follow Bryce about with the mingled devotion of a puppy and a Juliet . . .

Justine watched the proceeding and discoursed upon it with open relish. 'She's smitten, as they say in books — all sweet and goo-y! Isn't she a nut?' with good-natured tolerance.

Winnie thought the affair very sweet despite its rather obvious one-sidedness. Winnie thought all so-called love affairs very sweet . . . Sometimes she went back to her own, dimmed with the mist of time; went back to it with a little catch at her heart, half wistful. Hector had been so shy and so dear in his nice flannel trousers. She could remember the flannel trousers quite clearly, and the way the burs stuck in them when they went blackberrying. Mary and Edgar Potter had taken the bushes on the left side of the path, and she and Hector had delved through the others. They had stayed out late and come back by moonlight along a silver road, humming and singing — what had they sung? . . .

And now it would soon be Valerie-Maud's turn. Just a few more years . . . brief years. Bryce was a dear boy, Nellie's son, and right at hand next door . . .

Winnie wondered and smiled and wondered again.

3

For the third time in an alarmingly brief period Joan Blair was being sent home from school at an hour when, according

to all rules and customs, she should have been chanting the sum total of seven and eleven in shrill unison with some thirty-five other little girls being definitely propelled into the lanes of wisdom and the meadows of knowledge by a woman of extraordinary energy named Miss F. O. Cork.

In her pocket Joan bore a note. Substantially it was similar to notes she had borne on previous occasions, but it was couched with just a trifle less suavity, just a trifle less grace; and although Miss F. O. Cork had forgotten to dot her *i*'s, she had contributed a disproportionate number of exclamation marks, very black and masterful. (Miss F. O. Cork was like that — in times of emergency and high tension she was apt to dispense with such incidentals as dots for *i*'s, but she always landed heavily and eloquently upon really telling things like exclamation marks.)

She wrote the note very swiftly and blotted it with a bang that thrilled the thirty-five little girls to the core of their hearts.

'There!' exclaimed Miss F. O. Cork like the pop of a toy balloon. 'You take that straight to your Mamma, you naughty bad child!'

So Joan put the note in her pocket and trailed out of the room to do as she had been told. And Miss F. O. Cork blew her nose with a tremendous blast of noise like a bugle off key. She was a very energetic woman and she always seemed to seek relief for her feelings through her nose — which was an insufficient-looking organ, but capable of prolonged and varied noises.

Joan put on her hat and coat and gloves and rubbers in the front hall where the thirty-five little girls shed their wraps each morning. Then, when she was all ready, she took off her own hat and tried on Rosie Walter's; and after that she tried on a number of them, just to see what they felt like . . .

While she was making her selections, Miss F. O. Cork

came out into the hall and stood and watched her for a minute. Then she asked to have the note returned. So Joan took off her gloves and fumbled round for the inner pocket; and then unbuttoned and finally removed her coat, whereupon the note was revealed and handed over.

Miss F. O. Cork added another sentence at the bottom of the page, and two more exclamation marks, large but wavering because she was writing against the wall. Then she assisted Joan in getting into her coat and her gloves and her own private hat, after which space of confusion she escorted her to the front door just to show that she meant business. Miss F. O. Cork was a very energetic woman!

On the other side of the door there was a long, steep flight of steps, padded and muffled with snow. Joan sat herself on the top step and slid all the way down with a series of great jerking bumps which rendered her just a little breathless. At the bottom she collided with a small party of ladies who were first startled and then intensely kind and sympathetic, having rushed to the conclusion that she had fallen from a great height.

'Mercy!' panted the largest lady, who wore purple with an air of bravado. 'You gave me such a turn. Feel your legs, dearie, are they all right?'

Every one drooped anxiously over Joan while she felt her legs.

'My, my, my, my!' pattered the largest lady at a terrific speed. 'My, my, my, my!' (Some of the others tried it too, but they weren't nearly as successful.)

'Just a minute, darling,' commanded one of the ladies who wore Benevolence like a feather. 'Just a minute . . .' She began to look through all her pockets for a bag of gumdrops, and then she suddenly remembered that she had finished them up the night before. So she opened her purse and jangled the contents about impressively while every one watched to see how generous she was going to be. But she

couldn't find anything less than a quarter, so she had to let her reputation be sustained with a nice, bright smile — a trifle anticlimactic despite its width and glitter...

Joan escaped from them at last, although it was something of a wrench because they were ladies of a clinging disposition loath to part with an incident. They walked sideways and waved their hands with sprightly animation until one of them (the largest) tripped in her purple finery and fell on top of another (the smallest)! And then confusion reigned, and a diversion was swallowed up in a catastrophe. And that was that!

Joan ploughed and plunged her way through the billowing heaps of snow along the edge of the sidewalk. The streets were full of snow, fluffy and soft and moist under the thinnest crust of silver. It had fallen the night before from a low leaden sky . . . fallen and fallen and fallen until the heavens were emptied and only a pale, lusterless moon was left very high and far away . . .

And now the earth flared with whiteness, and overhead there was a wide, clear flare of blue. A fine day, a splendid day of racing joy and freedom. Joan swung her arms round like windmills, spurring up a silver mist of snow that showered back over her more gently than rain. It felt soft and lovely on her face . . . thousands and thousands of little cool finger-tips, patting, then melting away . . .

Nellie was exceedingly distressed at the note penned by Miss F. O. Cork. She said so a number of times in an earnest, somewhat hurt voice as if she had been stepped on. 'Joan, dear, Aunt Nellie is so distressed, so very distressed. Really, Joan, *really* . . .' And then she read the note all over again, frowning and tapping her foot and wondering what she ought to do.

Joan sat on the edge of the sleekly upholstered couch, swinging her legs. She hoped the punishment would be Bed-for-Three-Hours because she had made up a new game to

enliven such an occasion. It was very lovely and absorbing! You took a little pin, just a little ordinary one, and put it inside the sheets somewhere down near your feet. And *that* was the Holy Grail. Then you knelt upon the pillow and prayed for guidance and a strong heart and promised to wage a noble fight without fear or whimper. After that you tied a bath-towel round your middle for armor — silver armor with glittering links and bulging breastplate — and a thin, strong sword clanking at the side, and a plumed helmet on your head, and a shield striped with a crimson cross.

Then you plunged into the deep forest. It was very dark and hot and uncomfortable in there, and you were liable to fall out from time to time; but these things were only trials that tested your knightly courage. There were hordes of sorcerers and dragons hiding in the shrubbery, but you scorned them, simply scorned them, and they shriveled away into nothing at all. You had to search very slowly and carefully because if you came upon it too suddenly the Holy Grail had a habit of pricking rather sharply.

But you did find it at last — it was *there*, so you had to, and then you came up out of the gloomy forest and knelt on the pillow and prayed again. And this time it was a very glad and joyful prayer that began with the poem about the little hills skipping with joy and ended up with the promise to cherish and protect the Holy Grail forever and aye, Amen and Selah! Then you sang, 'Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past,' very softly with the sheet over your nose; and after that you laid the pin away reverently in an old necklace case of Aunt Nellie's lined with green velvet and stamped outside with gold. And that was the end, and the game was over. It was very lovely and absorbing!

At the conclusion of her fourth perusal of the note, Nellie had decided to have a little chat. Nothing crude — just a kind, but firm little chat to get things straightened out and

settled. She spread the letter on her pink flowered apron for direct reference and general inspiration.

'Now, Joan, dear,' with a certain careful briskness, 'Aunt Nellie isn't angry — she's just distressed, and she wants to have a nice little chat about it all.'

Since this was the usual thing, as inevitable as Sunday's roast beef or the evening stars, Joan merely swung her legs and gazed absently at the sprouting light fixtures in the middle of the ceiling . . .

'Miss Cork says you were a naughty little girl — you were rude to her in front of all the class. Just think of it, Joan! Rude to your dear teacher in front of all the class!' A pause to let this sink in thoroughly. Then, 'How very, very sad poor Miss Cork must feel, Joan!' (Which was all quite wrong, since Miss F. O. Cork was much too energetic a woman to drop into sorrow when the occasion justified something stronger.) Nellie, however, felt that it was a rather good point, so she repeated it, 'How very, very sad Miss Cork must feel . . .'

Joan glanced down quickly. 'But I was right, Aunt Nellie ——'

'Joan, is that a *nice* thing to say? No nice little girls pretend to know better than their teacher. Aunt Nellie didn't when she was a little girl, and Aunt Winnie didn't, and Papa didn't . . .'

'But I *was* right, really and truly, and I couldn't help it. It was Weenie Williams . . .'

'And what about Weenie Williams?'

Joan stopped swinging her legs and sat up very straight and earnest. 'She's afraid all the time, inside of her she's afraid. And Miss Cork doesn't know, and she makes her do things and calls her rude — but she isn't, she's just afraid.'

'Well? . . .'

'So I told her — it isn't *her* fault, she just doesn't *know*. So I told her.'

'Told her what, Joan?'

'That Weenie Williams is afraid.'

'But why, darling?'

'Well, if she knew that Weenie is afraid, then she would know that she isn't rude.'

'But perhaps she *is*, Joan.'

'No. She's just afraid — right inside and in her eyes.'

'But what is she afraid of?'

'Things . . . Miss Cork . . . I tell her not to be, but she hasn't learned yet. If Miss Cork would only *know*, then she would learn quicker.'

'But that's silly, dear. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

'No, not really and truly; but for Weenie there *is*. That's what I told Miss Cork.'

'But, Joan, Miss Cork is your teacher, a grown-up! You mustn't *tell* her things, darling. It's sweet of you to be nice to Weenie, but you mustn't be rude to Miss Cork. You must never, *never* say that you know better than your teacher. People don't like little girls who do that . . .'

'But if it's true, Aunt Nellie — *true* ——'

'But it isn't, Joan. You only think so. It couldn't be true.'

'But why can't I be right sometimes as well as anybody else?'

'Now, listen, dear. Miss Cork is a grown-up and you are a little girl. Don't you see it *couldn't* be true?'

'But grown-ups are only people.'

'Wiser people than little girls, darling. Older and much, much wiser,' with serene certainty and serene finality.

'But they *are* only people. Just having more years doesn't make them something else. *Everybody is just people.*'

If her grammar was bad, her logic was irrefutable. Nellie wiped her nose gently and inspected the note again.

Joan leaned forward, her chin cupped in her hands. 'But you can't *make* people know things, can you? Like Miss

Cork. You can't make her know about Weenie Williams. It's because she's all closed up like an eye — she *won't* know things.' She sat silent and very straight on the edge of the sleekly upholstered couch. And then, 'I don't want to ever be like that,' said Joan clearly. 'I want to always *know* . . .'

Nellie stood up and fluffed out her pink flowered apron, and that meant that they had chatted it all out as far as she wished for the time being.

'Aunt Nellie is distressed, Joan, because she doesn't like rude little girls. They make her feel unhappy — they make every one feel unhappy.'

Joan's gray eyes darkened. 'I don't want to make you unhappy; I don't want to make any one unhappy . . .'

'Then say you are sorry, dear. Tell Aunt Nellie you are sorry for being a naughty, rude little girl.'

Joan sat silent a moment, swinging her legs. 'Yes,' she said slowly. 'This time I am sorry, because you can't *make* people know; they have to want to. You can't *make* them.'

'And promise Aunt Nellie that you will never do it again, never, never . . .' ('Bed for just two hours this time, because she has been quite nice about it, and I can see her side, too, and, besides, she has said that she is sorry . . .')

'No,' Joan decided. 'I don't think I had better — because I expect I shall forget again.'

CHAPTER NINE

I

WHEN she was fifteen Justine definitely decided to be an artist; not a great, ponderous, earnest artist with a noble vision and a passion for painting stout madonnas and sprawling, vacant-looking babies, but one who could dash off racy, captivating little things — fluff, perhaps, but skillful, piquant fluff. She never doubted her ability. The essential thing was that she *wanted* to do it; the rest would follow; the desire was bound to materialize in some form or other. Besides she was fairly nimble with her pencil even now; not particularly accurate, but individual enough in a sketchy, careless fashion. A certain training was requisite, of course — that would have to be seen to . . .

'I'm going to an art school,' she announced casually one Sunday afternoon in the spring. Justine always came to the point with a minimum of effort.

'Now, dear . . .' murmured Nellie in a soothing, smoothing sort of voice, as if she were brushing butterflies off her lap.

'I can go Saturdays, and after school too. That ought to be all right for a start.'

'Yeh! You'd be a wonder!' interposed Bryce lazily.

'Sure. I expect to be,' blandly.

'What are you going to break into — portraits, landscapes, murals? Or will you just tackle every little old thing, and let it go at that?'

'I'll putter round for a bit and find out. But I want to do things with my pencil, and water-colors, perhaps. Oils look kind of heavy and impressive — I hate impressiveness.'

'Personally, if you'll pardon my frankness, I'm all for crayons. They're so decorative and easily applied — and, besides, they don't spill!'

'Yes, they are very pretty,' remarked Mr. Blair, not from conviction, but because it gave him pleasure to endorse any of Bryce's opinions — facetious or otherwise.

Nellie closed her magazine and shifted a little in the rose-cushioned rocking-chair. 'You don't really mean it, Justine, dear, do you?'

'Mean what?'

'About being an artist, darling.'

'Of course I mean it.'

'She's been plotting the whole thing out in private,' Bryce declared easily. 'Didn't even have the civility to consult the family beforehand.'

'Well, why consult? I don't want advice — it always makes such a mess of inspirations.'

Nellie glanced quickly at Mr. Blair. 'It's impossible, of course!' her look exclaimed. But Mr. Blair gave no reply.

'I'll start in next week,' continued Justine coolly. 'There's that place over on Wimble Street; I've found out all about it.'

'But, Justine, really, dear, Mamma doesn't want you to be an artist. It isn't altogether nice; it isn't ——' she hesitated delicately. In Nellie's mind artists were always vaguely associated with the nude. But of course one couldn't very well mention such a thing. 'It just isn't *nice*, dear. You must believe what Mamma says . . .' In awkward matters of this sort it was really more convenient to shift the burden of explanation onto somebody else. So, 'You tell her, William,' with an air of graciously inviting him to take the lead in a social intercourse.

Mr. Blair looked a trifle uneasy. He didn't enjoy explaining things to Justine. She always listened very attentively — *too* attentively, a mocking glint in her narrow green eyes, as if she were very carefully shredding his words into silly, meaningless little sounds . . . He cleared his throat after a moment or so, and began to speak straight into the bed of

daffodils before him. 'Perhaps, Justine, you have not fully considered the requirements of such work if one is to attain at least some measure of success. It demands, I believe, a high degree of concentration and perseverance and — er—— Well, to be precise, would it not be advisable to wait for a time and consider these various questions which — er ——'

Nellie felt that he was letting the argument slip through his fingers. 'But, William, I didn't really mean that — I meant it wouldn't be right for Justine, it wouldn't be *nice*, would it?'

'I think it would be lovely,' said Joan.

'Oh, but you don't understand, dear,' Nellie pointed out; and Joan was brushed firmly into the background.

Mr. Blair studied the polished tips of his shoes. 'You refer, I presume, to associates, surroundings . . .'

Nellie nodded. *Now* they were on the right track.

But Mr. Blair swerved again. 'There are, no doubt, among a certain class of artists, a great many things of a regrettable and — ah — offensive nature, but I do not feel that they are representative of the highest — that is, I mean that they cannot be taken as indicative of the entire profession like — like Michelangelo, for instance. It all depends, I feel, upon the individual; in this case it would depend upon Justine.' He raised his eyes from the daffodils and looked across the veranda at Justine, offering her one more gift . . :

And Justine looked back, half-curiously, and half in surprise. 'I was almost sure *you* would object,' she said.

'Why?' asked Mr. Blair.

'Oh, I don't know. I just thought you *would*.'

They sat there for a moment, examining one another in silence, as if for the first time their thoughts were running close together . . .

'No,' said Mr. Blair, 'no, Justine, I ——'

But Nellie's voice, high and earnest and a little impatient,

slipped in between his words. 'But, really, darling, I *know* it wouldn't be right. Artists are sort of — loose people, and they have to do and study all kinds of queer things, I've heard; not nice things, dear! You mustn't ask Mamma, you must just believe her . . .' It seemed a quite natural and simple thing to ask: 'You must believe her, Justine.' After that she relaxed against the rose-colored cushions, and prepared to turn over the leaf of conversation.

'It's on Wimble Street,' Justine remarked with a strolling unconcern. 'And it's two dollars an hour — reasonable, don't you think so? I told him I'd go on Saturday mornings from ten till twelve, and after school, maybe, according to this and that . . . You see, this is my what-d'you-call it? career, and I'm all wrapped up in it — or will be shortly — and if you take a person's career away from him, he's liable to just go smash. If you won't let me have art lessons openly, then I'll have to steal the money — don't wince! — or something silly and melodramatic like that. Anyhow, I have made up my mind! The studio is number fifty-four Wimble Street, use side entrance; fee two dollars per hour; chief high mogul by name of Monsieur Ignace Brenon; and the general atmosphere cluttered but pure.' After which delivery she squashed a mosquito and sat down.

'Oh, dear!' said Nellie limply. Then, 'William!' with an air of final appeal.

Mr. Blair was silent, again studying the polished tips of his toes. After a while he spoke with great deliberation and great politeness: 'I do not feel, my dear, that the occasion demands my interference. I realize that Justine is not my daughter, and therefore I have not the right to control or dictate her actions. If, however, she — you both — decide upon the studio, I will make arrangements for her work there.'

Again that look between them, swift and involuntary . . .

And again Nellie's voice with its edge of distress: 'But,

William — I think that is very sweet of you, of course, but, really, William, I believe it would be better for you to — to say something. You are in the place of Justine's Papa, and I feel it would be *right* for you to guide her. I can't help feeling that it would be right . . .'

And suddenly the friendliness in Justine's eyes went out.

'Oh, I'd let her go,' advised Bryce casually; 'she'll only kick up a great old fuss.'

'Probably,' assented Justine agreeably. 'And you might as well give in now as later on.' She got up and stood against the white post, talking over her shoulder: 'I'm determined to go through with it because of Roger. He always said to get into the thing you love and believe in, stick to it, and don't give a damn what other rattlebrains say!'

Nellie coughed into her lacy handkerchief. She did wish Justine wouldn't quote Roger before Mr. Blair. It made things so awkward all round . . .

'But *do* you love it?' asked Joan.

'I *want* it!' said Justine shortly.

And the next Saturday morning, at ten o'clock, she attended her first art class at the Wimble Street Studio of Monsieur Ignace Brenon.

2

THE studio was a large, sprawled-out room, the third floor of a house that had once known better and more pretentious days. It was slant-roofed, many-windowed, full of clear white sunshine and littered with an incredible variety and number of objects — easels bolstered up against the wall, and lockers, and dusty slabs of books, and empty frames, and canvases, and sheafs of brushes, and dirty chamois clothes, and bottles of turpentine, and a green glass jar perpetually full of licorice jujubes, and palettes smutted with rose and jade and periwinkle, and a general collection of

busts and classical odds and ends in the way of arms and legs and torsos. It was grubby and bewildering and full of enchantment, first because it was a studio, and second, and mostly, because it was the studio of Monsieur Ignace Brenon.

Monsieur was a tall, thin gentleman, a little stooped, with sparse, red hair and far-away eyes dimmed with the memory of dreams . . . He fluttered his hands about a great deal, thin, empty hands that explained and pointed, explained and pointed, but never did the things of the heart of Monsieur — the things that had once seemed so near, so splendidly near, barely beyond his finger-tips, like a silver moon within touch of a tree . . .

It had taken time to learn, long, lonely years; it had taken pain to learn, and bitterness and brokenness. Sometimes Monsieur felt full of ashes, full of the dust of splendor and glory. But he had learned in the loneliness, gained truth if nothing else; and he had come out at last from his mist of dreams to stand by and watch — where once he had thought to be watched. But his hands were empty; they pointed and explained and did little things; but they were very empty . . .

All through the long days and short days, ash-gray or flaring with white sunshine, Monsieur padded about the studio in his soiled blue smock and felt slippers, talking, humming slow, sad little airs, touching things — easels and books and stacked frames — touching them gently as if they were old friends, very old friends, who knew all secrets and were grown greatly wise. He spoke a soft, audaciously broken English with frequent lapses into a bewildering medley of ancient and modern tongues. People seldom caught more than the general drift of his conversations, but if they were kind they always agreed with him, and if they weren't particularly kind they were usually too nonplussed to be rude. No one, at any rate, was heartless enough to delve too deeply into his past, or to question his claim to the title Monsieur, or to note the disparity between Ignace and

Brenon, or pick up the hundred and one little odd threads of his life. No one had done it, and probably no one ever would; for somehow Monsieur was as remote as the stars — and stars are not pried open . . .

Nellie paid a visit to the studio the week after Justine commenced her lessons. She brought Winnie along with her for moral support and because Winnie was anxious (as usual) to find out all about everything.

They ascended the two flights of stairs leisurely and with a certain amount of creaking due to loose boards and Mrs. Earl's corsets, and arrived fairly composed on the top landing with its sudden slant of roof and its vacant window peering into the heart of a spraying elm and its square of sunshine dappled with the wavering shadows of leaves.

Justine opened the door — Justine looking a trifle more rakish than usual with her hair tucked behind her ears and charcoal smudged over her in a pretty general fashion . . .

'Darling,' said Nellie reproachfully, 'you *are* messy!'

'This isn't messy, it's merely evidence of my labor — like scars of war. Here, sit down and wheeze off the strain of the climb. Every one pants fearfully when they get up to us — you'd think we were parked on the summit of the Alps. Hey, Monsieur, Monsieur! Lady callers on the doorstep. Here he comes; isn't he precious!'

Monsieur padded over softly in his soiled blue smock and felt slippers.

Justine slipped her arm through his with a half-protecting air rather foreign to her. 'Ladies, this is Monsieur, lord and master of the studio and supervisor of the work therein. Thus endeth the first installment. Now, this is my mother, and she is wearing a new hat which is a pretty color, but doesn't suit her particularly. So we'll pretend not to notice it. She is my mother, but *her* name is Blair and *mine* is Blythe — isn't it peculiar? An interesting little puzzle for a rainy evening. And this is Mrs. Earl, who has an awfully

amusing husband named Hector who is the exact image of his Papa. We live next door to one another, mingle freely, and rarely fight.'

'Never! Justine,' interposed Winnie a little stiffly.

'Now, Aunt Win, don't bluff. I've had several little slapping affairs myself with Valerie-Maud (bless her!), not to mention —— Oh, very well! shall we discuss the weather?'

'*Mais oui*, she is a ver' great talker,' commented Monsieur smilingly. 'She start, and she go on and on, eh?' He fluttered his hands.

'Yes, *doesn't* she!' agreed Nellie — wishing that she didn't.

'That's because it's purely inspirational; the flow can't be stopped. After it's run its course I always retire meekly to the background, haven't you noticed?'

'No!' said Winnie with unnecessary flatness.

'Oh, but that's because my inspiration never runs dry when I'm with you, Aunt Win. It is renewed like the eagle, so to speak . . . But you probably want to talk me all over with Monsieur, so I'll run away and play behind Minerva. See, that's Minerva, with the helmet. Isn't she masterful? Say something nice about me, Monsieur. I'm very fond of goldfish — you might use that as a starter.'

'And, dear, just fix your hair; it does look *so* untidy.'

'In public! Really, you embarrass me, Mother. And, besides, it flops into everything and tangles up my vision. Better be sanitary than beautiful . . . I'll flit off now and gambol with the goddess; whistle thrice when you want me. *Adios* — that means good-bye and is one of the several bright little things I've picked up in the last week . . .' She clattered amiably across the room.

Monsieur shifted a screen of canvases and disclosed a dilapidated stool obviously on its last legs. Then he sat down very carefully and placed the tips of his fingers on his knees.

'And so this is a studio!' observed Winnie a little breath-

lessly. 'My, my, just imagine!' Her eyes raced up and down with a lively interest.

Monsieur smiled and nodded. 'I am most 'appy to 'ave you call and see it; though it should need a leetle dusting, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Oh, but things get dusty *so* quickly!' declared Nellie with swift sympathy. 'Don't they, dear?'

'Mercy, yes! it's depressing. And just look at all the statues, darling! They're so *real* looking, aren't they, Mr. Brenon? Don't you think they're real looking, Nellie?'

'Y-es,' agreed Nellie with a little hesitation. She discreetly averted her gaze from Venus. Were such things quite nice and proper? They were art, perhaps, but were they strictly moral? She was glad Mr. Blair was not present — he was so very sensitive when it came to anything the slightest bit questionable . . .

'I have a beautiful little girl,' continued Winnie brightly. 'Blonde — she inherits it from her Papa. Maybe you'd like to paint her some time?'

Monsieur bowed slightly. 'You are ver' kind, my dear madame, but for myself, I do not now paint . . .' And his hands were still and empty.

Mrs. Earl was manifestly crestfallen. She had already hung Valerie-Maud in oils over the parlor mantel.

Justine's laugh snapped out from across the room.

Monsieur smiled. 'She is *vive*, full of noise — how say you *Anglicé?* Lively, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Yes, indeed,' agreed Nellie a trifle cautiously, because she was venturing on uncertain ground.

'What was that?' asked Winnie in a loud whisper.

'Justine, dear — he says she is very lively.'

'Mercy, yes, isn't she!' with full and hearty acquiescence. 'And how long have you been over here, Mr. Brenon?'

'Pardon, Madame.'

'Have you been over in this country very long?'

'I 'ave forgot, I am afraid, to count the years — my memory, she is ver' bad. But *n'importe*. You wish to hear of Justine, is it not so?'

'Yes, please,' said Nellie politely, hoping that they would hear about her in English.

Monsieur's quiet, far-away eyes turned to the empty window and looked off into another world — his world. 'At the commencement one cannot tell so much, at the commencement one cannot see the end. But she like to work; *mais oui*, she is ver' 'appy when she work. Others too . . .' He shrugged his shoulders a little sadly. 'But in a leetle while they stop and they forget . . . Justine per'aps will not forget. We wait, and *nous verrons*. That is all some peoples can do — just wait and see, *n'est-ce pas* . . .' His voice trailed off into silence and then wandered back again, soft and tranquil. '"*Ars longa, vita brevis*" — but with *diligenza* — who knows? All do not fall behind with the leetle things; some they go on, up to the stars — and they are the 'appy ones. In the meantime Justine work . . . I do what I can for her; I give what I 'ave to give. But always, always, the beeg thing mus' come *ab instra*. Is it not so, Madame?'

'Oh, yes,' assented Nellie brightly — having definitely decided to commit herself for better or for worse. 'Oh, yes, Monsieur Brenon.' Although more or less unintelligible, he really seemed a very nice Italian gentleman — or was it French? She must remember to ask Justine.

Winnie, enormously impressed and bursting with curiosity, nodded strenuously and said 'Certainly!' several times with vague emphasis. 'Certainly' was indefinite enough to be fairly safe — a nice, bland little word to cling to in a sea of complications . . .

Monsieur arose and fluttered his fingers gracefully as if he were wafting their conversation into the past. 'Well, then we wait and hope, *n'est-ce pas?* And now you shall see about my studio if you will be so kind as to notice not the dust.'

'Mercy, yes,' agreed Winnie cheerfully. 'We're used to it, darling, aren't we?'

Nellie felt that it was a rather unfortunate remark; it might create a wrong impression, quite a wrong one. So she said, 'What a lovely lot of sunshine you have up here! I do so enjoy sunshine, don't you, Monsieur?'

Justine strolled over casually and joined them. 'Hello, jury! Is there any of me left to carry on? It's so exciting to sit off in a corner and watch yourself being discussed.'

'You are quite talked away, *ma chère* — all but the noise.'

'Well, the noise is the most impressive . . . Oh, Monsieur, please avoid Venus and any others without clothes — they embarrass Mother horribly.'

'Justine!' faintly.

'Well, dearest, I'm only trying to spare you. Why have unnecessary suffering? There's a ducky little thing over by the radiator that you'll simply love; she's demure and restrained and muffled to the chin. And the Laughing Faun is safe — a quaint creature with dimples and ears like Uncle Hector. And there is a divine Arab next to him, very stern and virile. And . . . let me see . . . What other chaste pieces do we possess — most of them are so frank ——'

'Justine!' a little pleadingly. (What made Justine so audacious and rude? One would think that she owned the studio, owned Monsieur, owned everything and every one within sight and sound. All this swagger and loud talk was most disconcerting; and ill-bred too, decidedly ill-bred. 'I must have a little chat with her,' Nellie concluded firmly. But she wouldn't, of course, because Justine had a way of slipping through the most carefully prepared little chats and standing on the outside, bland and laughing.)

Monsieur piloted them about skillfully through a fascinating muddle, his slippered feet pad-padding softly and his hands waving out this and that . . .

'With care, *mesdames*, there is here a nail. Justine, we will one day purchase a hammer and attend to this nail! And here, some sheets that I would have you not to brush against; and to my right, a small table who wobbles if she is touched. *Merci*, *merci*, you are all mos' patient with my funny furnitures . . .'

At the other side of the room, in the full flare of sunlight, two girls were working in charcoal, and an elderly, somewhat grim-looking woman was squandering a legacy on china painting.

They watched them for a few minutes — Nellie standing off a pace or two with her head tilted critically, saying superficial things with an air of great conviction and insight. 'I think it's so beautiful to be able to express one's self, don't you, Monsieur? Somehow, I have always felt it . . . Isn't that one pretty? — such a sweet, sweet face.'

Monsieur frowned. '*Ma foi!* but it has no business to be a sweet face. See, *mon amie*' — he bent forward and fluttered a thin hand — 'what 'ave you 'ere, eh? And from where did you get this? *Mein Gott!* it is sweet, yes, but it is not *comme il faut*. Here and here and here are *corrigenda* — how-say-you, mistakes, errors. It is not to be sweet but *true*, *ma petite*, that you come to my studio . . .'

Winnie, highly interested and wholly admiring, attached herself to the other pupil and clattered into a steady stream of questions and observations. 'I think it's marvelous and all, really and truly. Look at that chin, Mr. Brenon! Nellie, darling, come and look at this chin! Isn't it *real!* Isn't it marvelous! I don't see how you do it, really I don't. I wish I could draw, but, mercy! I can't even make a straight line.' (Winnie had always labored under the delusion that the first requirement of an artist was the ability to execute a straight line.) 'Doesn't it make you nervous to have some one watch you, dear? Are you quite sure? I wouldn't make you nervous for anything. And say, dear, I have a very beautiful little

girl, blonde — she inherits it from her Papa. Maybe you'd like to paint her some time . . .'

'Thank you, but I haven't reached life studies yet.'

'Oh, all right, there's no hurry, dear. I just thought I'd mention it. And what's that you're drawing with?'

'Charcoal,' a little wearily.

'Charcoal! Imagine! Nellie, did you hear that — charcoal, darling, charcoal! Just think of it. And what do you do to keep it from smudging, dear?'

'Spray it.'

'Well, I declare! Isn't that bright? I don't see how you think of all these things, really I don't . . .'

'In a leetle while,' Monsieur suggested, 'you come again and then you see what Justine 'as done. For the present she 'as jus' dabbled, jus' — how do you call it, Justine?'

'Puttered round; idled; loafed. But I'll settle to work soon; I may be crude, but I'm not lazy. That's one comfort.'

'Yes, you will work, *n'est ce pas?* And you will not tire nor forget. You will work for all that you 'ave in you. And then, who knows . . .'

'Sure,' said Justine quietly. 'Sure, Monsieur.'

Nellie and Winnie departed shortly afterwards.

'I have to call for Hector's boots,' Mrs. Earl explained. 'They've been rubber-heeled. I think rubber heels are so nice, don't you?'

Monsieur escorted them to the outside door, and bowed several times very gallantly, and murmured, '*A rivederci*' and '*Auf wiedersehen*' alternately in his soft, tranquil voice. . .

When they turned into the street at the end of the grass-grown path, they could see him still standing in the doorway, tall and thin and a little stooped in his soiled blue smock and felt slippers . . .

3

THE wheel of the year turned slowly and lilac time came and went.

In the long summer evenings while thin white moonlight flowed coolly over the earth and over the sky above the earth, and the stars swung low and golden from a canopy of blue, Justine drifted into streams of thought as old as the hills and new as a silver dawn . . .

Sometimes she thought of Monsieur — and sometimes she tried to laugh at Monsieur, tried to laugh at his restless, posing hands, at his jumble of words, at his burnt-out, far-away eyes looking wistfully over a high wall into a forbidden land. 'I *will* laugh at Monsieur,' she resolved. 'He is funny; his fluttering hands are funny, and his earnestness, and his name, and his big flapping feet . . .' But somehow her laughter crumbled into dust before him, and her eyes were drained of their easy mockery.

Only once she resisted this new strange tide of compassion, once on an ash-gray day very heavy with brooding clouds.

'*Mein Gott!*' Monsieur cried with a brief rush of anger, 'for why do people come here if they have no dreams? For why, I ask you, should they clutter the way with their leetleness? Is art then a game to be played at like the cards or the tennis? *Ma foi!* I tell you, *non*, *non*, and *non* again! It is to give — to give all that we 'ave and all that we dream . . .'

And Justine, standing behind in the shadow of Minerva, mimicked him precisely, widened her flashing green eyes, clenched her fists, picked up unerringly a dozen stray whimsies and oddities of manner.

Some one tittered — the grim-looking woman painting china — and Monsieur turned quickly on a slippered heel. He was silent a moment, rather inscrutable, and then: 'Per'aps,-after all, you make not so good an artist, but a better actress, eh, Justine?' A soft, unhurried voice, sagging a little with hurt . . .

And something in Justine flickered out, quite swiftly, quite finally, as a candle blown by a wind.

At noon before leaving she spoke to Monsieur on the little

square landing with its wavering pattern of leaf-shadows and its blank window staring into the heart of an elm. 'I'm sorry,' said Justine straightly. 'I'm sorry, Monsieur.' And suddenly she was crying it! — Justine, who never cried 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it . . . I didn't mean it, Monsieur . . .'

And sometimes in those long, shadowy evenings she would think about Mr. Blair . . . Justine knew only one standard, only one rule of measurement, and Mr. Blair, beside Roger, seemed silly and almost negligible; a little man bound fast with cords of convention and propriety, and trying to conceal his littleness behind a great show of dignity. She held, with an almost childish tenacity, to that first concept she had formed of him — as some one who was trying to take Roger's place, some one who had thrust himself into Roger's family; and when little things occurred now and then which didn't fit in with that picture, she tried, with a sort of fierce loyalty, to ignore or to misconstrue them. Mr. Blair, with his strings of long words and proper opinions and his ridiculous devotion to a far-off Orient, was something to be laughed at. Roger would have laughed — Roger, so gay and fine and arrogant, who hated littleness, who towered above it . . . But Justine tried not to think too closely of Roger. Even now, when she said his name or drew near to him in thought, something deep inside of her seemed to break up completely, seemed to melt and dissolve until she was full of tears and loneliness . . .

But Roger would have laughed; and so she did, too. An old, familiar sentence came drifting back from the past: 'Laugh at them always — and then perhaps you won't get hurt.' Words like a tune from a lost piece of music . . . And so this laughter was a gift from Roger; a gift and a weapon. It was to keep her from getting hurt; it was to keep life from touching her too closely. A rather queer arrangement . . .

The stream of thought broadened. Did every one, every-

where, have some kind of weapon? She, Justine, had laughter. And Nellie Blair had complacency; a vast calmness and trust that things would unfold harmoniously sooner or later, in one way or another. But that was nothing but cowardice, nothing but a shrinking away from the demands of life. And Mr. Blair lived beneath a shell of pompous dignity; he was walled about with stiffness and reserve. But that wasn't much good either — a flimsy sort of armor liable to be dented (as she could dent it), or smashed up altogether, perhaps, at a moment's notice. Bryce had nothing in particular; only a casual contentment with life as he found it, and the easy, pleasant ability to slip and drift through the days without effort and without jars . . .

And Joan — what about Joan with her elfin face and happy eyes? It was difficult, very nearly impossible, to know about her; she was so quiet and aloof, like a golden-brown butterfly tipped lightly on the edge of life. But she wasn't little. Roger would have liked her; perhaps Roger would have understood her. Justine couldn't; she had given up trying long ago. Joan did such queer, delightful, careless things; she was simply spilling over with them. Groggles, for instance! Who but Joan would ever have thought of anything quite so delicious as Groggles? And there were all sorts of others besides — games and whimsies and stray bits of happiness . . .

Only the other day or so Justine had found her kneeling in the warm sun-soaked grass at the side of the house where green shadows hung from the elms and golden-bodied bees wheeled on their way to the flower beds surging now with midsummer loveliness. She was talking in a soft, conversational voice — praying, perhaps, it was . . .

'. . . and thank you just ever and ever so much for this happy day, dear God, and for all the lovely things everywhere — especially people and the sky and the White Ship. And thank you for taking care of the dear ducks and show-

ing Trillium the way home when she got lost — Oh, look at that tiny little bee, God! I like bees; they sing all the time. I like butterflies too — thank you so much for bees and butterflies. And help everybody to *see* the loveliness so they can be happy and skip with joy like the little hills. I wish people *would* skip. Wouldn't it be nice, God, if nobody walked anywhere, just skipped all the time? Why don't you make them? And now I think I'll sing a poem to you about fields being joyful and the little waves clapping their hands —'

'But say,' Justine broke in interestedly, 'how about all the other things — the *not* nice ones? Don't you take those up?'

Joan twisted round. 'Hello,' she said in a surprised voice.

'Hello yourself. But what about the *other* things?'

There was a drift of silence traced with the low, soft flutter of leaves far overhead. Joan sat back on her heels and looked off through a mist of sunshine to the clear wide blue of the sky.

'I don't think,' she said slowly, 'that God — my God — has anything to do with those.'

Well, Joan was funny; there was no getting away from that. Perhaps God was her weapon.

Justine had laughter. She felt safe and a little pitiless with this laughter — this gift from Roger Blythe.

CHAPTER TEN

I

NEAR the end of September, while Longfellow Street was merging into a coppery gold and the days were beginning to tighten up swiftly into dusk and shadows, Bryce left for Harvard, bound for knowledge and life — but mostly for life.

His departure was a very stirring and touching occasion with every one present wearing a proper air of suppressed grief — every one with the exception of Valerie-Maud (who rarely suppressed anything, expecially grief!) and Justine (who, on this day at least, had little to suppress).

Hector drove them all to the station in his car, a very subdued vehicle, which he manipulated with fond caution and an eye to puddles. Bryce and Joan sat with him on the front seat, while the others were wedged in behind in a grave and solemn mass. From time to time Winnie roused herself and contributed a stray remark pertaining to the weather, past, present, and future, and Nellie always replied, 'Yes, indeed, dear,' very clearly, so that they might see she was determined to bear up bravely, even chattily, under this ordeal.

They arrived at the station much too early, and Mr. Blair spent at least ten minutes in trying to find out how it had happened. 'What time was it by your watch when we left, Hector? No, not now, when we *left?* Yes, so was mine. And how long do you allow for the car? Fifteen, and twenty on a bad day. Well, was to-day a bad one? A good one, just so. Then let me see . . .' A period of careful and detailed reckoning. 'It is most extraordinary, I must admit, *most.*'

Nellie and Winnie and Valerie-Maud sat down on one of the benches that lined the back of the platform; and Joan roamed off casually, bouncing her ball with one hand and carrying a present for Bryce in the other.

'Well,' remarked Mrs. Earl, removing the moisture from her upper lip with a vigorous, scrubbing gesture that left the tip of her nose a warm rose-pink, 'well, darling, I only hope that he doesn't come out of it all like Mary's boy. Her letters are getting so depressing nowadays. Dear Charles, she says — remember he used to squint, Nellie? I wonder if he still does, poor dear — well, Charles isn't the same person since he started going to Yale ——'

'Oh, well, *Yale!*' observed Nellie vaguely but crushingly. 'What can you expect, dear?' She had learned this much from Bryce already. 'And, besides . . . besides . . .' with the air of one who is too well-bred to indulge in odious comparisons, but is forced to recognize a fact.

'Oh, of course, darling,' with obliging haste. 'I didn't mean that he would — I was just hoping that he *wouldn't!*'

'Perhaps he'll get tired of it and come back,' suggested Valerie-Maud hopefully. 'I bet he *does*. He'll probably be home before Christmas; he'll probably be home *long* before Christmas. I bet anything he is!' Valerie-Maud was like that. She always gathered certainty and momentum as she advanced. Thus she might start out with the vaguest conjecture and finish up with a definite and passionately defended conviction!

A south-bound train flashed in before them, blotting out the orange sun and the black-etched line of house-tops against the warming sky.

Mr. Blair strolled over with an elaborate pretense at indifference and stood beside the engine, rocking gently on his toes, his hands clasped behind his back. He loved the smell of it, the smoky, pungent smell. It was like a heady wine stirring his blood to adventure, loosing his pent-up dreams, until the things about him, the common things of a work-a-day world, were but shadows and empty echoes of another life . . .

How wonderful and how magnificent a thing was this train!

A great free creature tearing across the face of the earth; through plains and valleys and hills; sweeping swiftly by silver lakes and streams; hurling itself through thrashing, purple storms; piercing the heart of the woodlands and shattering the woodland's stillness. Ever rushing and screaming, rushing and screaming, like the winds and the gales themselves . . .

How wonderful to be borne by this creature, to be jerked and thrust forward into space; to lie breathless at night and watch whole cities and countries and worlds flash out briefly and magically, and then fade away with the forgotten things of the past! How wonderful to cut through the night, to split open miles and miles of blackness and silence; to race to the moon and the stars . . . and catch up at last with a fleeing dream . . . ! What wonder, and what fulfillment!

Back on the grimy platform bench Winnie blew her nose twice with a noise like a whistle. 'That train goes to Florida, doesn't it? I guess Florida's a nice place, only it must be pretty hot. What's William doing, darling?'

Nellie unclipped a gray suede glove and smoothed it off her white hand. 'He's just watching, I expect, dear. William is so fond of trains. Here, pull this, will you, Winnie; no, a teeny bit harder . . . *There.* But he hasn't been on them much — I don't think he's slept on one yet —— Val, dearie, run and tell Joan to keep away from the edge. Say it makes Aunt Nellie nervous to see her so near . . .'

Valerie-Maud rose obligingly because she enjoyed telling Joan to do things — especially when her orders were duly sanctioned by the higher powers.

'Hey, you!' she commanded briefly. 'Get away from the edge.'

'Why?' asked Joan.

'Never you mind why. Just get away. It's terribly dangerous and it makes your Aunt Nellie nervous.'

Joan trailed over with the air of one who submits through compulsion, not conviction.

'What are you carrying?' demanded Valerie-Maud peremptorily.

'It's a present for Bryce.'

'Oh!' She was vaguely irritated. She had forgotten all about getting a present for Bryce. 'What is it?' she inquired suspiciously. 'Handkerchiefs?'

Joan frowned slightly. 'If I was your mother,' she remarked with dignity, 'I'd make you mind your own business!'

'Why, you naughty bad little thing!' in an excessively shocked voice. 'You tell me right this minute or I'll slap your face!'

'Oh, no, you won't,' corrected Joan affably. 'Not in front of all these people.'

Valerie-Maud subsided into cajolery. 'Ah, don't be mean. I won't tell — cross my heart and hope to die! Please, Joanie, darling, *please*. You know I always tell you everything.' Which was more or less of a sweeping assertion.

Joan relented and came a little nearer. 'Well — it's a book!'

'What kind of a book?'

'A *different* kind; I made it up by myself.' She looked round carefully to see if they were being observed, and then unwrapped the parcel with great caution and a touch of honest pride while Valerie-Maud hung over her shoulder, heavy but admiring. It was a small cardboard scrapbook with 'Our Fammily' printed laboriously across the terra-cotta cover.

'My gracious goodness! What's it all about, Joanie, darling?'

Joan graciously explained. 'It's for him to look at if he gets lonesome — everybody's in it. See, here's Aunt Nellie; she comes first ——' And sure enough, there on the front page was a snap-shot of Aunt Nellie, somewhat wrinkled and

gummy from the process of being glued, but otherwise quite familiar and presentable with her blond hair neatly waved and her fat round earrings gleaming whitely. Underneath her was a block of large, wobbly writing . . .

'See,' Joan elaborated, 'that's to make him remember just how it is. When he's all by himself he can look at this and then close his eyes and pretend.'

'Well, I declare!' Valerie-Maud leaned over further and read in a low, muttering voice: 'Aunt Nellie is sitting on the front veranda in the green chair with the rose-and-black cushions. She has on her pretty apron with the roses all over it and her hair is sort of ruffly at the sides because of the little wind. She is rocking herself a bit with one foot, tap, tap, and she is very comfortable and happy. It is in the middle of the afternoon and everything around Aunt Nellie is warm and sunny and slow. She is very comfortable and very happy.'

'My gracious goodness!' exclaimed Valerie-Maud admiringly. 'That's wonderful, really and truly it's wonderful! But your aunt wouldn't be wearing an apron in the middle of the afternoon, Joanie, darling.'

Joan waved the remark aside. 'Oh, *that* doesn't matter.' It was the airy indifference of the artist for a mere trifling fact. 'And here's Father, over on this page ——'

'Where?' asked Valerie-Maud blankly.

'This one — here.'

'My gracious goodness! Is *that* your father?'

Joan nodded and gave a pleased, rather triumphant smile. 'I found him in an old, old book up in the attic.'

'But how did you know it was him?'

'It said so underneath; it said "E. William Blair, 1890."'

'Well, I declare,' remarked Valerie-Maud, vastly impressed. 'Well, I declare! I never saw a funnier-looking thing in all my life!'

Joan regarded the likeness critically but kindly. 'Well,

everybody looked funny then — you ought to have seen the others! They had moustaches all over their faces . . .'

'Honest?'

'Sure. And the ladies let their clothes sort of — sort of slip; they all went to the bottom, you know.'

'Joan Blair!' with virtuous astonishment.

'Well, they did too! My own grandmother did, so there! Her name was Maria Crosby and she was fat, but she had nice eyes and a dear little dog. And now don't you want to hear about Father?'

Valerie-Maud leaned forward again and began to mutter stealthily: 'Father is sitting by the window of his room and he is reading his little books with the lovely colors. It is night-time and the moon is outside in the quiet sky. It is very still and Father is reading and thinking about the pictures, and loving them. He is very happy.'

Val nodded. 'My, that's wonderful too — But I never saw anybody look so funny in all my life! Honest, Joanie, look at him. He's so *funny!*'

'Well, I guess your father was too. Maybe he was funnier. And the next one is Justine.'

'But she's a baby,' in some surprise.

'I know,' said Joan with the faintest trace of regret. 'But I couldn't get any other one; and, anyhow, she *is* a nice little baby. Look at her head — it hasn't got any hair!'

'Well, I declare! isn't that funny! I had lots of hair when I was a baby; my mother says she never saw so much hair on a baby before.'

'I like them bare best,' decided Joan reflectively. 'It must be nice and cool, and rain would feel lovely, and the wind and snow — especially snow . . .'

'But it looks so *funny*, all that skin! Here, let me read about Justine.' Joan tilted the book again: 'Justine is sitting on the front steps and she is very quiet because she is remembering things. It is in between the afternoon and the

evening, and there are three stars, golden ones, and Justine has on a white dress and it looks soft like a cloud. She has stopped making a noise and she is remembering things. She is very happy.'

'I don't think that's so good,' said Val candidly. 'You ought to have made her yelling or something. And how'll he ever know that baby's Justine?'

'He knew Justine when she was a baby,' explained Joan serenely. 'He'll remember.' She turned the page.

'My gracious goodness, there's *me!* Where did you get my picture, Joan Blair?'

'I stole it,' said Joan blandly. 'But I explained to God so it's all right.'

'Well, my goodness! I never heard of such a thing — and, anyway, why did you go and steal this one? It's the worst picture I ever had. I look awful, I look simply awful! See my nose? My nose isn't like that really; it's a shadow, and it makes me look awful. You crazy little thing, why didn't you steal a good one!'

'Well, you don't look any funnier than Father,' Joan consoled. 'Hurry up and read it, if you want to.'

Valerie-Maud wanted to intensely. She hung over the book with frank and absorbed interest: 'Valerie-Maud is writing a letter to Bryce. She is wearing her best blue silk dress with the little pearl buttons like raindrops. She looks very pretty. She has just washed her hair and it is all shiny and golden. She is sitting at the dining-room table and she is writing a letter to Bryce. She is very happy.'

'Well, I declare,' in pleased confusion. 'That's lovely, Joanie, darling, that's the best one yet! Say, that *is* lovely,' with gathering enthusiasm. 'Only,' slightly hesitant, 'if I'd just washed my hair, I wouldn't be wearing my best silk dress . . .'

Joan waved the objection airily aside. 'Oh, *that* doesn't matter.'

The last page was turned.

'My gracious, it's you, isn't it? You look awfully sweet — say, that's the sweetest picture I've ever seen you in! What are you holding on your finger?'

'It's a butterfly, a big, soft one, the color of honey. I stayed there just as still — as still ——'

'Well, I declare, isn't it tame! Here, let me see what you've written — "Joan is outside playing." Is that all?'

Joan tilted her head thoughtfully. 'I couldn't think of anything more. I tried to tell about the butterfly — but it was too beautiful.'

Valerie-Maud turned consoler. 'Well, never mind. It looks sort of sweet just by itself like that.' She ran her fingers through the leaves of the book. 'I think they're all wonderful. I bet Bryce thinks so too; I bet Bryce thinks it's the nicest present he's ever had.' (Which was rather magnanimous considering that she had given him a seventy-five-cent tie, green with pink stripes, only the previous Christmas.)

'It will help him to remember,' said Joan in her quiet, far-away voice. 'We're all here. He can close his eyes and see us being happy. I made us all happy — I made us all doing the things we love best . . .'

Justine arrived a few minutes before the train and with scarcely less bluster and panting.

'*Mein Gott*, as Monsieur would say, you ought to have seen me sweeping through the streets! It was inspiring, it was stirring! I halted for neither man nor beast.'

'You look it,' observed Bryce disparagingly. 'What's that on your nose? The usual?'

'Oh, probably, probably. Noses are such outstanding features; they collect everything. Lend me a hankey, Mother — I suppose you're simply padded with them for this heart-rending occasion! Ugh! perfume; it smells to heaven ——'

'Sit down, darling, here, beside Aunt Winnie. We don't want to get excited; every one is going to be nice and ——'

'Calm? Sure, I'm willing. Nothing in the world like a peaceful exterior. Oh, look at poor Val. Unhappy, dearie? Well, just brace up and don't get excited. Watch me, I know how it's done. You smile like this, see — wide and, oh, so courageous, *n'est-ce pas* Uncle Hector?'

'What's that?'

'Oh, nothing vital. Let's admire the sunset. D'you know I've just discovered that I'm enormously susceptible to sunsets. They pierce me to the core of my heart; I tremble with ecstasy, and so on and so forth. What's the time?'

Mr. Blair delved into the middle of his person and extracted a large gold watch. 'We have' — he paused and did a little sum under his breath — 'precisely four and two thirds minutes.'

'Oh!' said Nellie quickly. And then she smiled, a brave Spartan smile.

And Winnie thought: 'How wonderful! I don't see how she does it!'

And Bryce thought: 'I hope to heaven we get through without a scene!'

And Joan thought: 'Dear Aunt Nellie, she likes being brave — it makes her feel pleased!'

'I was going to bring a girl from the studio,' Justine continued breezily. 'Her name's Wilhelmina — Hell, for short — but she's an atheist, and I remembered at the last moment that this was to be a strictly Christian farewell, so ——'

('Bryce, dear, the new socks, the *blue* ones . . . you are quite, *quite* sure . . .')

'"And so, Wilhelmina," said I kindly but firmly, "I'd love to have you come, but as the boat moves off we'll probably pray ——" But, dear me! it isn't going to be a boat, is it? A mere train — what a crushing flop!'

Valerie-Maud raised her voice plaintively: 'Say, Bryce,

you'll be home before Christmas, won't you? I bet you'll be home long before ——'

'Hush, pet!' commanded Winnie impressively. 'Hush!' as if the curtain were about to go up in a theater, or a singer burst into song. Winnie was warmly appreciating every atom of drama and tension the occasion afforded; sympathy was flowing through her in thick, melting waves — sympathy shot with gleams of excitement. 'Nellie is so courageous, so unusually courageous . . .' She patted Nellie gently and murmured something glossed with cheer.

'Nice weather,' observed Hector from the farther end of the bench. He was, as usual, a trifle behindhand, in his observation.

'Oh, marvelous!' agreed Justine enthusiastically. 'So limpid! And now wouldn't you like me to sing to you awhile? — that is always most heartening and fortifying! — Aha! what is this? I see a far-off whistle and I hear a puff of smoke. Let us grip ourselves together, family and friends; let us grip and be rocks of calmness . . .'

Mr. Blair stood up and straightened out his coat precisely. 'It is approaching,' he announced formally. 'Permit me to attend to your bag, Bryce. I thank you.'

'Oh, dear!' wailed Valerie-Maud, stricken with acute distress. 'I don't see why you have to go — why *do* you have to go, Bryce? I don't ——'

'But, Val, he's coming back; it will be lovely when he comes back.'

'But why —— Say, when are you going to give him his present?'

'At the very last.'

'Oh, Joanie, darling, let me give it to him!'

'No, I want to my own self.'

'Oh, please, Joanie, darling, *please!* I'll take care of it: I love giving presents. Please let me give it to him!'

Joan hesitated a moment and then handed the parcel over.

'Well — put your finger in the middle or it comes undone; and don't squeeze or we'll all stick together inside. I'd like to give it to him my own self; but, anyway,' with returning cheer, 'I did have the fun of making it.'

Winnie's long nose was working rapidly with excitement. 'Darling, I know just how you feel, and you're doing wonderfully, simply wonderfully! Hector, help William with the bag, no, not Bryce, *William*. Really and truly, darling, I don't see how you do it. I could never bear up; I'm so emotional — Valerie-Maud, keep away from the edge, dearie, and hold Joan's hand. Joan, *Joan*, come over here and hold Valerie-Maud's hand. My! my! Listen to that racket!'

The train flashed in with a blast of noise and the station was jerked into sudden activity.

'I must not break down,' Nellie thought, tears, like little wings, fluttering at the back of her eyes. 'I must be brave for Bryce's sake; I must not break down . . .' And her plump white fingers curled over Winnie's arm.

Mr. Blair carried the suitcase into the train. He walked quickly up the dim and dusty aisle, his shoulders sagging a little from the drag on his arm. Coldness and warmth pressed down upon him . . .

'Bryce is leaving — Bryce is going away.' And then, far above, like soft and silver music, 'In four years — in four years we shall be starting off for the Orient; we shall be at the beginning of everything; at the beginning of life . . .' And strange, melodious words went chiming through him and chiming through the dim, close tunnel of the car.

Mr. Blair sat down stiffly on the edge of a cinder-filmed seat to wait for Bryce to come in.

Outside on the platform a wave of farewells, crested with tears, was breaking over the departing son of the house.

Hector had lapsed into giggles at the crucial moment, and the more Winnie prodded him, the greater became his anguish. 'Really, Hector, *really!* Think of poor dear Nellie!'

But it was no good. Hector, with tears in his eyes, tried to explain that it was no good. But that was no good either, since he was too distressed to be coherent.

Valerie-Maud's wail rose piercingly and incessantly. 'Good-bye, dear, dear Bryce — dear, dear Bryce, good-bye.' An unvaried but fervently shrill refrain.

And 'Bon voyage,' chanted Winnie loudly and proudly (when she wasn't prodding Hector and adding to his misery). 'Be a good boy and write and tell us all about it. Bon voyage — bon voyage!' like the steady waving of a flag.

Justine roamed on the outskirts of the group chatting briskly to no one in particular. 'Gosh! but ain't this a grand send-off! Look at the cheering mobs, the massed bands, the tiers of flowers. Note the police, the reporters, the private detectives. Hooray! Hooray! Hear the ringing shouts from a thousand throats! Observe the mayor, the governor —— Hey, Bryce, Val wants you to write to her. Bryce, lamb, Val wants —— I'm not shouting; don't be so meticulous. I'm talking in a perfectly genteel tone. Heaven is my witness, aren't you, Heaven? Say, Uncle Hector, you're bearing up fine; I don't see how he does it, do you, Aunt Win?'

'Hush!' returned Mrs. Earl severely. 'Can't you think of your poor mother! And you hush, too, Valerie-Maud. Think of your poor Aunt Nellie.' And then she prodded Hector to complete her duties, and frowned tremendously.

When Bryce bent down to kiss her — he was so tall now, so tall and shambling as Roger had been before him — Nellie felt herself crumbling into tears, crumbling and flowing resistlessly into a deep river of grief. 'I must be brave — I must be brave ——' But the words dissolved and went flowing away and she could do nothing to stop them.

'Good-bye,' said Bryce, a little huskily. 'Good-bye, Mother. I'll write — and so on.'

'Yes, dear, I know, I know,' and every little bit of her growing lax and yielding and frail . . .

Then Valerie-Maud knocked rudely between them. She was very red and secretive. 'Here, quick! It's a present for you. I made it all by myself — I made it for you all by myself ——' She bobbed back hastily behind Nellie, and fiddled with her gloves and flicked dust off her sleeve and folded her pink handkerchief into a very tiny square . . .

Justine suddenly stopped making a noise and put her hand on Bryce's arm with a friendly gesture. 'Remember what Roger used to tell us about the big things and the little things? Well, you hang onto that. Roger knew what he was talking about.' And quietness lay in Justine's eyes, the quietness of remembrance.

'Thanks,' said Bryce, 'I will.' And he disappeared into the train followed by a final wave of farewells.

'Good-bye, darling, good-bye,' tremulous and faltering; the frail echo of an early bravery.

'Bon voyage — bon voyage!' steady and unflagging like Winnie Earl herself.

'Dear, dear Bryce, please come home before Christmas; please . . .'

'Cheers rent the air; children sobbed; women swooned; strong men wept on one another's shoulders. Hooray, hooray!'

'*Justine!* I don't see how you *can* with your poor Mamma and all! There, Nellie, there! I never saw any one like you, really and truly. Bon voyage — bon voyage!'

'I hope you have the happiest time, Bryce, the happiest time . . .'

Inside Mr. Blair was shaking hands with Bryce. 'A prosperous and pleasant year, I trust. I shall write every week if you so desire. A pleasant year — *most.*'

'Thank you, sir. And I want you to know that I appreciate all this. I'll — I'll pay it back to you some time. I appreciate it.'

Something glowed out from Mr. Blair's eyes, something very warm and very bright. 'Not at all, not at all,' he returned stiffly. And then he shook hands again and walked abruptly down the aisle.

2

NELLIE and Winnie were quite upset about the war in Europe. They discussed it a great deal while they sewed before the fire on late autumn afternoons with a whir of stiffened leaves outside and a pink tranquil warmth lapping pleasantly about them.

'Really, Winnie, I always supposed we had advanced beyond things like this, didn't you? Somehow with all our culture and civilization — that little piece of lace, dear. Yes, it's off that old prune-colored moire. I gave it to The Girl when we left — she was always so grateful for odds and ends. *And* the cream silk, Winnie. Isn't it? Well, it *was*. Oh, no, here I am sitting on it. —— Well,' with a settling back into earnest contemplation, 'with our great culture and civilization it seems incredible, doesn't it, that men are going around there shooting one another — simply shooting one another. As I often say to William, so far as I can see it is just plain murder. I don't want to be harsh, of course, but you know what I mean, dear, don't you?'

'It's a wicked shame!' declared Winnie warmly. 'And what do they all think they're doing, anyway? Europe's so funny! What do they think they're *doing?*'

Nellie didn't know. Neither did she know quite how the war had come into being in the first place, although she often wondered and once asked Mr. Blair, who presented her with a highly complicated and involved explanation from which she derived a muddle of names and an incorrect date or two.

Winnie pricked her finger and licked it thoughtfully. 'It's so babyish,' she observed with matronly disapproval. 'Europe ought to know better.'

'But it's Belgium, dear . . .'

'What about Belgium?'

'Don't you remember? — we read it all in the paper. It said poor little Belgium had to — had to —— Oh, you remember, Winnie. We read it and we said we agreed with it perfectly. Belgium really did have to.'

Winnie couldn't remember, so she advanced to another point. 'It all comes back to their kings,' she declared firmly. 'If they didn't have a Kaiser they wouldn't be in this mess. Look at us; we're not killing one another.' Which was true enough at the present moment.

Nellie felt that perhaps there was a little more to it than just kings; but her feelings were all too vague and blurred to be projected into reason and conviction.

She ruffled the strip of cream lace that was warmed to the faintest rose by the flare of firelight. It was soft and fine between her fingers, a lovely patterned web. Old lace from a far-away gown that Roger had loved in a far-away time . . .

'Perhaps,' she mused, 'things aren't really as bad as they make them out to be. Perhaps, dear, they are just exaggerating.' Nellie was like that. Whenever brought up against a jagged corner of life, she always tried to smooth it, to pad it about as comfortably as possible.

'No, darling; it's probably worse,' declared Winnie with the remotest shade of relish. 'I guess they have to suppress the *very* worst.' She wished that they didn't. After all, one might as well know the whole truth as a few gory fragments . . .

Nellie's white lids fluttered down and she murmured, 'Dear, dear, dear,' in an abstracted voice, and then stopped to bite off her thread. It was all very terrible and dreadful, this war — and all very far away. She was sorry for those poor people; oh, exceedingly sorry! When she thought of the mothers (even the German mothers), tears welled up

easily and rolled down her warm pink cheeks. 'I too am a mother; I can feel with them; I can understand.'

But underneath the froth of sympathy and distress she felt quite placid and contented. Across the world, across a blue infinity of ocean and sky, life might be horribly upset, and undoubtedly was, but here on Longfellow Street it flowed with smooth tranquillity like a clear and windless river. Everything was prosperous and everything was ordered and substantial — wide, gracious elms with their trickle of yellowed leaves and their great roots bulging the earth; and old houses worn into mellow comfort; and people and babies and dogs all very plump and sleek and muffled about with cheerful serenity. Life blunted to a pleasant routine and dulled with bland convention . . .

Nellie's larkspur-blue eyes would cloud with sympathy for the other half of the world; and underneath she would be thinking: 'Purple asters in the tall copper jars and maple sprays in the brass bowl . . . Mrs. Brodie on my left — no, Mrs. Harry Hollister; *then* Mrs. Brodie, and then Henrietta or, yes, Henrietta . . .' Poor Europe and the poor, poor mothers. I too am a mother; I can feel with them, can understand. Oh, dear, dear . . .

And autumn paled slowly into winter and the days rolled out one by one — links in an endless chain.

3

Mr. Blair wrote to Bryce every week with the unfailing regularity of the tides and the seasons.

He planned the letters on his way to the office in the mornings, and polished and stiffened them up as he came home through the cloud-blue dusks whitened with frosty globes of light and topped with handfuls of early stars. He liked the planning best — gathering things from his heart and telling them to Bryce without tongue or pen, talking to Bryce in silence . . .

After that he wrote them on paper in his stilted, narrow hand, selecting the words with precise and fastidious care, going on and on, page after page, all very dull and involved and earnest: 'I was exceedingly gratified to hear of your success in passing the history examination. This was particularly pleasing to me, inasmuch as I have always contended, and with just cause, I trust, that a broad background of knowledge pertaining to the past events and strivings of the world is of vital import to one who desires to appreciate the conditions and situations of this present day, and maintain withal an unbiased attitude of thought — that is to say, subordinate personal or racial interests to the more progressive and unifying policy of grounding one's judgment upon fact rather than upon willful, or ignorant, prejudice. This, I believe . . .' and so on and so on, until he became enmeshed and bound in a tangle of words that said nothing he really wanted them to — nothing that mattered between him and Bryce.

There was always a first draft to be made before the writing of the letter itself. The whole thing very soon steadied itself into a weekly rite: first the planning, which was free and simple because it was a silent process and a secret one; and then the first draft, a little abrupt and ragged; and after that the final copy, completely drained of all feeling and all meaning . . .

Bryce's scrawled notes in return, brief, and casual as Bryce himself, filled Mr. Blair with a great warmth and a deepening sense of his claim upon Nellie's child. 'My son at Harvard; my son saying this, doing that.' It was becoming natural to think these things, to think them in this way; as involuntary and irresistible as yielding to a truth. Only, of course, this wasn't a truth, but just a web of fancy to throw across the emptiness of facts . . .

And people like Justine knew it, saw it, and mocked him for spinning his web. Justine's eyes said hard, relentless

things: 'He is not your son, he is Roger's, he will always be Roger's — nothing on earth can change it. There is no use pretending. You have Roger's wife, but you can never have Roger's son!'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

THE next summer Mr. Blair bought a cottage up on the wooded shore of Lake Winnepesaukee. He hadn't intended doing anything of the sort. Neither had Nellie. But Justine swept them into it with a rush of voluble enthusiasm that blew off all refusals and objections as if they were wraiths of smoke.

'Come on, Uncle Will; be a good sport. It's a great place, really and truly — mountain air, lapping waters, and all the rest of the paraphernalia. A couple of girls from the studio go up every year, and you only have to poke a finger at them and they'll burst into a pæan of praise; a little gushing, but quite sincere. It seems to me it's the sort of thing we can't afford to miss. And, besides, I crave space and water — I want to learn to dive.'

'But, Justine, it's quite impossible. There is Miss Peabody. She expects us as usual — doesn't she, William? — we're practically bound.'

'Certainly, my dear,' very definite and clipped.

'Miss Peabody!' drawled Justine with a fine disdain. 'A field of daisies to romp in and one meek cow to provide excitement, and Miss P. herself everlastingly suggesting that we try a new ointment to foil mosquitoes and asking us half through the morning if we slept well and looking insulted if we don't finish up all our carrots — I'm not going to be led back there again! You can go if you want to, but count me out and tell the old lady I was mislaid in the rush.'

'She is a very estimable woman,' stated Mr. Blair in a bolstering sort of voice.

'Lord, yes! She drips with estimability. And so do the daisies and the carrots and all the host of them thereof. Even the cow sheds a benign radiance and gives forth milk

as if it were a benediction. That's why I'm not going. It's altogether too exacting if you're not thoroughly accustomed to the Peabody brand of goodness. Let's have a vacation this year, a *real* one. You'll dote on it, Mother, once you stop clinging to Miss P. from sheer force of habit. For instance, you can buy a pair of water-wings and go floating for hours on the lake — fat people never have any difficulty in keeping up!'

'Justine, *please!*'

'Now, dearest, don't be sensitive. If you must be fat, then be fat with a air of enjoying it — as if it were choice, and not necessity. Once you become embarrassed, you're utterly lost.'

'I am *not* fat!' declared Nellie feelingly. 'Am I, William?' with the faintest shade of anxiety.

'Certainly not, my dear. You are most — most acceptable.' (And inside he thought, with a little rush of surprise, 'Why, yes, that's it — most acceptable! Not vital or inspiring or even deeply affecting; but most acceptable.')

Justine slapped a fly against the wall. 'Well, you don't wobble; that's one comfort. But now, about this cottage. I think it's a first-rate idea with no end of advantages. We can wear out all our old clothes — cast-off party dresses and silk stockings with runs. Consider the economy of the thing! It will be stupendous! And we can cultivate simple tastes and get back to nature. I've always wanted to get back to nature, haven't you, Uncle Will? Grub around with the grass and the berries and grow beautifully primitive! Now think of attempting it at Miss P.'s. Why, if you got back half an inch she'd be goggle-eyed with astonishment — and there's nothing in the world like blank astonishment for taking the spirit out of a thing.'

'Justine, dear, it is impossible. We've practically promised.'

'And, besides, you have to think of me — it's one of the

little privileges Heaven bestowed upon you. Now artists are tremendously susceptible to their environment — that's a fact, not a theory — and Miss P. and her cow, estimable though they both are, simply drain me of inspiration. I can't work; I can't vision; and therefore I'm perfectly miserable and an utter loss to the world in general ——'

'Justine, it's no use, really, dear.'

'But now consider what I might do if put into a place of mountains and lakes and berries. Think of the possibilities! Take the lake, for instance. I can paint the exterior from every angle, and then I can practice sitting inside to get first-hand impressions of the fish. Perhaps I am destined to spring into fame with the portrait of a trout — who knows! Anyhow, I have the name and address of a man who owns a lot of places up there, and it's early in the season, so we ought to stand a pretty good chance of getting what we want.'

Mr. Blair stiffened into firmness. 'Just at present, or rather this year, I do not feel that I wish to consider the matter. As your mother says, we have obligated ourselves to a certain extent, we ——'

'But why not now?' Justine's eyes regarded him with that cool, quizzical straightness. 'It's going to be rather hard on Bryce, you know.'

Mr. Blair didn't want to take any notice of that; he wanted to ignore it with an air of complete indifference. And then, 'Why will it be hard on Bryce?' Mr. Blair asked.

'Good Lord! — beg your pardon, Mother — you can't expect a Harvard man to wax enthusiastic over daisies. He won't go, of course; that's a foregone conclusion. Miss P. right on top of Cambridge would be a bit too thick. If he grumbled last year, he'll erupt this time for sure. I shouldn't even be surprised if he went off somewhere with that Bill Howard he's always babbling about in his letters. You could scarcely blame him . . .'

'Oh, but Bryce wouldn't do that,' declared Nellie swiftly

and confidently. All the same, her slim brows came together in the hint of a troubled frown . . . 'He will need a really good vacation, of course, and a nice long rest, won't he, William? After a year of such hard work he will really *need* it.'

'Oh, most assuredly,' agreed Mr. Blair. 'Most assuredly.'

And so he bought a cottage on the wooded shore of Lake Winnepesaukee.

2

NELLIE yawned and then lay placid and inert, half-sleeping, half-waking; consciousness flowing back to her with the pleasant leisure of an incoming tide . . .

Outside everything was wet and dripping and clear-cut against the morning sky. That was last night's rain, of course; it had slapped down heavily hour after hour — the storm they had watched brooding over the mountains all through the twilight and dusky evening. In the midst of it William had got up out of bed and put a pail under the leak in the kitchen. So sweet and thoughtful of him — she had forgotten all about the leak.

And now everything about the cottage was shining and fragrant with a damp woody fragrance; drenched trees and warm drenched earth and close-packed pine needles, sodden and brown, that would be steaming later in the heat. It was all rather lovely after a night of rain; lovely to smell and to look at, but a little messy to walk in. Beyond the green of the woods, the lake was leveled to a plain of blue, serene as the sky and merging, off toward the opposite shore, into clouds and billows of early mist. Soon it would be blown clear and warmed into deeper radiance . . . 'Such a dear lake,' mused Nellie with drowsy affection.

There was a sudden splash of laughter through the quietness — Justine and Joan taking the first swim of the day probably. They were both so energetic, racing about in the

early dawn, crowding every moment with action and enterprise: Justine in a whirl of chatter and loudness, and Joan in a whirl of wonder.

'No, shoot down like this — see! Oh, damn! I swallowed it. Now have another try; I'll hoist you up if you don't come to the surface ——'

'But when I get to the bottom, what do I do?'

'Just woggle around a bit; nothing elaborate. Come on now. One, two, *three!* Hurry up!'

'Say, Justine, how *do* you woggle?'

'Like Aunt Win when she's excited — a sort of hitch and jerk. All right, *ready!*'

A thin splash. 'Ow! My nose — it's all gone up my nose, Justine!'

'Never mind. Blow it between your fingers, hard.'

('Oh, dear,' thought Nellie with languid distress. 'I do wish Justine were a little more delicate . . .')

'Well, I did it, didn't I? And right to the very bottom — I banged my head on it.'

'Lord, yes! You'll beat me if I don't look out. I don't bang my head, I bang my tummy. Come on now and make a try for the raft — I'll tow you if you give out in the middle . . .'

Silence again, and then Joan's laugh, clear and rippling, farther away down the lake.

Nellie stretched herself luxuriantly in the warm flow of sunshine, uncurling her fingers, pink and soft like a child's. 'Joan has a pretty laugh,' she reflected. And then, 'Dear Joan,' with a comfortable benevolence that took in everything about her — the mist-frayed lake, the dripping trees. the whole wide morning, and life itself . . .

3

Breakfast on the big square porch flooded with yellow light and overtopped by a host of pines and silvered birches.

And after that the usual onrush of Justine's friends and Bryce's friends — occasionally common but more frequently antagonistic.

Nellie in pink linen, with a long frilly collar as white as the early mists, came outside to say good-morning, very gracious and serene.

'How do you do, Jimmy; isn't this a beautiful day? Yes, *isn't* it! And how is Mamma, Helen, dear? Oh, I'm *so* glad. Good-morning Max — and Mary, isn't it? Oh, no, of *course*. Dulcie! I'm so stupid about names. I'm always telling Bryce that he will have to buy me a little book so that I can —— Justine, *Justine!* I wish you would run along and dress, darling. Put on something nice.'

Justine in a red bathing-suit still rimmed with dampness dangled her legs over the porch railing. 'Why, dearest, why? My figger may not be particularly ornamental, but anyhow it isn't a blight upon the scene. And, besides, I can always think more keenly if I haven't got much on.'

'Justine!' Nellie's voice slipped quickly into an old groove of distress.

'Oh, dear, I just know I've gone and said something indelicate again. I'm so hopelessly naïve — that's my chief trouble in life. I can never discriminate between what is honest and what is vulgar.'

'Hear, hear!' applauded Bryce feelingly.

'Well, politeness, y'know, is all a process of elimination. You sort out your thoughts and voice only the most tasteful and discreet. The rest you retain for private amusement. Sometimes you slip in your selection, and sometimes you are in a perpetual avalanche of slips like myself.'

'Personal revelations,' observed Max. 'Straight from the heart, and quite, quite voluntary!'

'Just so — your interruptions are always beautifully to the point. But, as I was about to remark, the avalanche is probably the more effective. If you go only halfway, you'll

be embarrassed; if you go the whole way, you'll be marked as a social failure, but an artistic success. As Roger used to say, most achievement is two thirds audacity.'

'You sound terribly clever,' admired Dulcie — who was so pretty that she could afford to praise other girls before members of the opposite sex.

Justine tilted back her head so that the sunshine slanted warmly across her face and throat and softened her eyes to a woodland green. 'Oh, poppycock!' she said. 'Every time you start out to arrive at a conclusion people think you're trying to be clever. Say, Jimmy, how's the puddle-jumper? In working order yet?'

'Depends on the point of view — one front wheel shimmies madly and the remaining mud-guard's suspended by faith alone. Otherwise in perfect condition.'

'Sounds all right. Let's get some grub and make for Chocorua. I feel in a lofty mood; I wanna climb something.'

'Huh!' remarked Bryce scathingly. 'You need to be taken up a mountain on a leash. Every time I look at you you're on the point of falling off or crashing down a crevice or dangling loosely in midair — as if the whole thing were a sort of genial suicide expedition. As for the descent — it's too nerve-racking to chronicle!'

'Sure,' agreed Justine affably. 'I want speed, not decorum — and I get it, b'gum! I always — if you happen to have noticed it — leave you miles above daintily picking your way!'

'When I descend a mountain,' stated Bryce with dignity, 'I descend it properly — I don't tumble.'

'Heaven forbid! Harvard expects every man to do his duty and remain upon his feet. Now chirp up with something touching about how My College Sustains and Fortifies in the Face ——'

'Oh, dry up! How many can you manage, Jimmy?'

'Bryce, don't ask embarrassing questions. We'll all go, of

course. Thank you so much for your kind invitation, Jimmy, dear; we'll all simply love to go. Those who can't get inside can push, and we'll have shifts from time to time. We can sit on the food to save space, so don't bring fragile victuals. Something sturdy like canned beans won't mush, and ham cut very thin, I've found, will stand any amount of wear and tear.'

'I don't want to climb,' remarked Dulcie a little pensively. 'I don't feel much like it.'

'Neither do I,' put in Bryce promptly and gallantly.

Justine looked interested. 'What's up now?' she inquired.

Dulcie was eighteen and she had problems. They cropped up every week or so, very vital and disturbing; problems about things in particular and things in general — but mostly in general. Dulcie was deeply and tremulously affected by her own youth and her own loveliness, and deeply, tremulously, affected by the panorama of Life spread out before her — spread out like a great plain seared with light and shadow. She was facing it all very earnestly under a froth of vivacity. 'Another fight with Mamma,' she explained. (Mamma was Dulcie's biggest and most frequently occurring Problem.)

'About the new man?' asked Helen sympathetically.

'Oh, yes — he started it. But it wasn't just *him* — it was the principle of the thing. It was the whole principle back of it.'

'Who won?' inquired Jimmy, who had recently lost a family battle of his own.

'Nobody; it's still hanging on the clothes-line. He wants me to go to the One-Pine-Inn. She says I can't — *it's* too hot and *he's* too hot!'

'He has a gold tooth,' observed Justine dreamily. 'I could never get excited over a man with a gold tooth — it looks so mercenary.'

Dulcie clasped her hands about her knees and gazed ear-

nestly across the shimmering lake. 'She got mad as the devil,' with a trace of sadness. 'I talked and talked, but she just won't understand — you know how it is! She says I'll be sorry some day . . .'

'Oh, rot!' drawled Bryce loftily. He might have been squashing a fly with his voice.

'She's always saying that; if I do this or that, or say something or other else, I'll be sorry some day. Well, what of it? I don't care if I am. But she simply won't believe that I'm *honest.* She thinks I'm being led ignorantly astray — a lamb to the slaughter, and all the rest of it. She thinks that I haven't the remotest idea what everything's about or what I'm doing.'

'My Heavens, we've got to have experience!' stated Helen with the air of one who voices a new and startling truth. 'We've got to have experience!' she repeated, because it was the one thing they were finally and absolutely sure of. 'What does every one think we're going to do, anyhow? Stick around like a crowd of vegetables and play dominoes? I'm sure I don't want to be coddled up in innocence. I want to — I want to ——' She dwindled away into silence because everything beyond that one definite ridge was rather vague and blurred.

'I know. That's just what I told her, darling; the very same thing. I want experience. I don't care if I do have to pay for it. I'm not afraid!' — very clear and earnest.

Bryce nodded, and Helen and Max and Jimmy. They weren't afraid either.

Dulcie lifted up her lovely little face with its flower-blue eyes, and the sunlight ran all down the curve of her white throat. 'I'm not afraid,' she repeated, and it might have been a confession of faith. 'I want to know things — I want to know life.'

Bryce saw it from a slightly different angle. 'We'll all settle down afterwards,' he said comfortably. 'It doesn't

hurt to play around a bit — every one does. We're young; we've got the right to.'

'Sure,' agreed Max largely. 'Sure.'

Dulcie's thoughts rolled along in a little groove of their own. 'I don't mind paying; I don't care if I have to suffer — it's part of life.' She tipped her head higher. 'I don't care if I have a tragedy, a great black tragedy . . .' She felt very reckless and gallant. Youth standing with wide-stretched arms and thrown-back head — standing erect and unafraid on the rim of Life. 'I want to suffer,' she cried clearly. 'I want to know everything — everything — even tragedy!'

They all sat very still and quiet, thinking brave thoughts and young thoughts — holding out their hands . . .

The lake curved in toward them, wide and placid and sheened with gold; the morning air, fragrant and warm with piny dampness, pressed about them; and above, very high and far above, the sky flowed peacefully like an endless sea . . .

Justine flapped her leg against the porch railing and caught a mosquito. 'And only Mamma,' she observed laconically, 'stands between you and your tragedy!'

As the morning swelled into a golden noon they all went off in Jimmy's car, racing down the white road by the side of the flame-blue lake.

Justine sat straight and jaunty on the back of the crowded seat, her hair whipped closely about her head, her eyes narrowed and flashing in the hot flare of sunlight.

'Hang on!' yelled Jimmy. 'If any one falls out, he'll have to stay out — the brakes aren't working!'

'And the hind wheel's limping,' observed Justine cheerfully. 'What d'you do — talk to it with soothing words or bully it up?'

Dulcie threw back her head in the swift rush of air. 'Go fast!' she cried. 'Go fast — fast ——'

Bryce's arm tightened about her. 'That's the spirit,

Jimmy! Don't be timid — we'll all chip in and pay for the gas!'

'What in the dickens is that wheel doing?'

'Oh, damn the wheel; it'll bear up . . .'

Justine sat taut and erect, her hands gripping Bryce's shoulder. 'Go like the devil!' she yelled. 'Like the devil, Jimmy, old dear!'

They skimmed down the white road by the side of the flame-blue lake, heads thrown back to meet the long cool rush of wind. The white road thinned to a needle point far off toward the shadowy hills — and all along the white way old trees stood still and silent . . . beautiful in silence . . .

4

NELLIE loved having meals on the big square porch, loved to lift her eyes from the table and see two walls of pines and birches and a third of shining lake.

In the morning everything about them was silvered and blurred by mists; a new day roofed with a pale new sky. And in the evening it had all grown mellow again and lovely, with a coral sunset trailing above the hills and stamping pink shadows on the quiet water. At noon it was different — very cheerful and sparkling with the lake boat passing before them on its usual round, and smaller launches cutting white gashes through the placid blue, and cars and laboring camp trucks back on the road behind the woods. It was hot, too; summer heat freighted with the pungency of pine and damp earth . . .

The table was set at the shady end of the porch where leaves flicked and ruffled against the screening and the crickets whirred with a low monotony.

'Such a beautiful, dear day,' said Nellie, who liked to talk about the things she loved.

Mr. Blair dabbed precisely at his mouth, and frowned upon discovering a crumb.

'I have grown so fond of everything here — the trees and shrubs, and even the grass, dear, and all the little sparrows. I was telling Winnie in my last letter that we can learn so much by just watching nature. Take a blade of grass, for instance — pepper, William — just think of all we can learn from a blade of grass.'

Mr. Blair was tactful enough not to ask for details. Instead he said: 'Most assuredly. And have they gone climbing again?'

'The children? Yes, I believe so — but I don't see why they have to do it, really and truly I don't. Rushing all over the country after mountains, and then racing up and racing down again. It seems rather silly.' She buttered a slip of bread, her little finger delicately crooked; a plump little finger with a pink, well-polished nail. 'I do hope they will be careful. Justine is such a reckless child, and she does such unpleasant things with herself on a mountain, Bryce says.'

'I don't doubt it,' remarked Mr. Blair crisply.

Nellie glanced up, the remotest hint of a frown skimming through her eyes. 'Well — she's young, William, and energetic, very energetic. Her Papa was too, you know . . .' And then she stopped and felt rather embarrassed, just as she did when she spoke of God. ('But Justine *is* energetic!' she repeated to herself in defense.)

The lake boat passed leisurely before them leaving a thin trail of smoke uncurling against the sky. Some one called out and was answered from the shore. From the Dobbins' camp probably — they always waved to every one and everything . . .

Joan sat very silent and engrossed at the side of the table. By carefully tipping and woggling her plate she had at last got the gravy to settle round the mound of mashed potatoes like a heavy brown sea. She had eaten all the meat to get it out of the way! The potato was an olden castle and the gravy was the surrounding moat. *That* was the setting.

Now for the action! The knights had put up the drawbridge because a tremendous army of enemies had recently hove in sight. Inside the castle they were preparing for a hard siege of several months — carting in venison and ale and pork patties through an underground passage leading from the sea, and bolting all the doors fast with great slabs of steel against which even Satan couldn't prevail! They had put the lovely droopy ladies in the turrets to keep them safe, and lent them the court jester to make them laugh. And the tremendous banquet hall was full of armed knights with plumed helmets and swashbuckling swords. They were all discussing the siege very bravely, saying 'gadzooks' and 'prithee, sir,' to one another, and peeking out of the gun-holes in the wall to see how the enemy was getting on. They sent one of the kitchen scullions onto the highest parapet to make a face at the foe; and all the knights took off their handsome helmets and waved them in the air and cried: 'We defy you — we defy you, gadzooks!' And the enemy gnashed their teeth . . . She leaned her elbows on the table and gazed upon the besieged fortress.

'Joan, dear.'

And the enemy crept up — and up ——

'*Joan!*'

Joan looked up and sighed; then she mashed the castle into the moat with a resigned air. 'An earthquake arose,' she decided disconsolately. 'And everybody perished — gadzooks!'

5

Joan lay very still listening to the night sounds from the woodland and the lake.

The cottage was full of quietness and darkness, but outside things were calling — and things were misted and whitened by the moon. Day was lovely and night was lovely, but night was lonely, too, with its far-away sky and cool

far-away stars. It held a great silence, and deep inside the silence it held little wistful sounds — night sounds — like the faintest flutter of a fan. It was the time for thinking and dreaming things; but people seemed to have forgotten that; they went to sleep as if a button had been pressed, and forgot all about the lovely night . . .

Joan slipped noiselessly out of bed and trailed her fingers along the smooth wood wall until she reached the door leading out. It opened and closed with the thinnest whir of sound.

Before her the pines were massed blackly against the sky, and the birches were slim and gleaming like pale candles beneath a wilderness of stars. Night trees very quiet and secret under a quiet and secret moon. She ran through them down to the slip of beach, her feet pressing into the short grass and growing cool and wet with dew. Behind her was a sleeping cottage held fast in a sleeping wood, and out in front was a wide black lake rimmed with shadows and stamped with a silver trail . . .

Joan knelt down at the water's edge and threw back her head, staring into the great loneliness and the great silence of the sky. A slim new moon was sailing across the dark sweep of the mountains — a curved and shining ship bound for the far-away land of Nowhere-at-all. Sailing through star-flowers and mists of cloud; never stopping, never hurrying, just sailing the lonely ways of the night.

Joan knelt very still. Wings of wonder and ecstasy beat in her throat. 'Oh, you beautiful — you beautiful ——' The silver trail grew tremulous with splendor, the trail of the White Ship, the shadow of the White Ship cast on a sleeping lake . . . All the world was petaled with stars and grown sweet with a cool night sweetness . . .

Why were people shut away from this night? Why were they lying with closed eyes and closed thoughts? Had they forgotten, or had they ever learned, how wonderful it was to

kneel in the darkness and look into the face of the sky — to let loveliness pass through you and through you like a wind or a song? You could never tell them about it, never, never; because every one in the world had to find out loveliness for himself. The things that didn't matter much you could learn outside, asking about them, talking about them; but the big things that made you happy and made you understand, they had to be learned inside all by yourself, with thinking, not with speaking.

And now was when the big things seemed nearest and most lovely, now when all the noise of the day was swallowed up in a great and beautiful quietness, and all the little odds and ends of things were quite gone as if they had never really happened. And you too were full of quietness — so that you could hear and feel and understand the wonder of the night, and learn the happy things that really mattered. But people slept; all about the shadowed margin of the lake they lay still with closed eyes and closed thoughts. That was why it was lonely. If one other person were kneeling there, watching, too, then it wouldn't be lonely any more. That was what broke loneliness — not just people; but when people, even two of them, looked at a thing and understood it in the same way. That broke loneliness, and that was why the world was so lonely — because people were always looking at things and understanding them in different ways. But only *thinking* they understood them, because there could be but one real way — and the real way would be the beautiful way forever and forever . . .

Joan sat very still, her eyes dreaming on the silver trail across the shadowy lake. 'I want to always understand in the real way,' she said, 'always . . .' And then the thought was gone and she went on sitting at the edge of the shadowy lake, a pale moon sailing above her through a wide, star-petaled sky.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

JOAN was shopping for Christmas presents in the rush and crush of a Saturday afternoon. It was a very important and absorbing affair especially as she was carrying it through quite by herself with no adult suggestions and repressions to shape an adventure into a mere performance of duty. That was one of the queerest things about most grown-ups; they would take happiness and fun and make it look like work. They would get worried and earnest and tired like Aunt Nellie when she had to think about uncomfortable things. And all the time (it was wonderful how they managed to overlook it) they might have been enjoying themselves.

Anyhow, it was much nicer to shop by yourself. It gave you such a lovely, frisky feeling that you wanted to do all sorts of breathless and exciting things. And you could too — that was the wonder of it. You could do just about anything. Every time you felt like it you could go into Hollis's and get a drink of water from the funny little fountain that squirted all up your nose if you pressed it too hard; and you could pat babies; and smooth your fingers very carefully along the beautiful silks trailing over the counters; and try on hats; and look at the pictures in books; and watch people buying shoes and go all red when they discovered holes in their toes; and ride up and down in elevators six times right off.

And, furthermore, there were games. You could play any amount of them. You could shut your eyes and keep on walking straight ahead until you'd counted ten. If you did it without bumping into any one you said, 'Praise be to Allah,' which was Indian and very pretty; and you took one more cent off the fifty cents Aunt Nellie had said to spend on Val's present, and added it onto Father's. It was really

quite fair because every time you *did* bump into any one you said, 'Oh, I am *so* sorry,' and then hurried on as if you had something very special to do — and after that you gave back a cent to Val.

(Other shoppers found it a trifle disconcerting to have a little girl of some eleven years, attired in a short reefer coat, a small round hat held under her chin with an elastic band loose from much sucking, and the thin stick of a raspberry sucker protruding from the corner of her mouth, walk point-blank into them with an agreeable disregard for consequences!)

There were other games too — ones where you tracked people all down the street and where you tried to see how many times you could touch the traffic policeman without getting arrested. They were the sort of things you could do only by yourself, and they were all very exciting.

Between games Joan walked along leisurely and decorously enough, keeping close to the shop windows so that she could trail her fingers across the cool glass. It was really the loveliest kind of a day for buying Christmas presents — all blue and white and crisp with big clouds whipped into puffiness by the wind, and a sky so warmly colored that it seemed as if August must be looking down at December. A clean day and a sparkling day, tingling like thin music.

And such a tremendous lot of people, all stepping on one another's feet and talking in shouts and pawing their way through crowded aisles with a great deal of puffing and glowering. It was funny how excited people got when they bought things — especially ladies. Their eyes grew sort of poppy and greedy when they saw a sale going on, and sometimes they got quite rude, even pulling at one another and saying not very polite things. Especially when they were selling underclothes — ladies could get quite crazy over a sale of underclothes. That was one more thing it was hard to understand!

After she had passed up and down the street a number of times, Joan decided that it was late enough to take the first plunge in the business of the afternoon. She had exactly eight dollars and thirty-four cents wrapped up in two handkerchiefs and stuffed into her purse. Sixty-six cents she had already parted company with — five for refreshment in the way of a raspberry sucker, one for weighing herself, and sixty for celery. The celery was something of an accident; that is, it was unexpected. She had met a nice foreign man selling it at the corner of Wimble Street — a very nice man with big gentle eyes and a cold nose. She had stopped and patted his horse, and then she had noticed the celery — lovely little bunches with sprays of silvery green leaves, wet and shining, and white-grooved stalks sprouting from a pointed root. The nice man had looked at her, tiredness in his face; and Joan had thought a moment and then said very firmly, 'Two, please.' And that accounted for the celery.

The remaining wealth wrapped up in the two handkerchiefs seemed immense, fairly limitless! What couldn't you do with eight dollars and thirty-four cents! Why, anything — practically anything. For instance, you could get something like a hundred and sixty suckers. Incredible! Joan felt a trifle dizzy and pleasantly reckless . . .

Now, of course, the thing was to decide what to get. Aunt Nellie would come first; a present for Aunt Nellie. She wandered aimlessly up the center aisle of Hollis's, her brow wrinkled thoughtfully. At the end they were selling hats. She stopped and tried on three from sheer force of habit, and then resumed her casual exploration . . .

Aunt Nellie liked pretty things and comfortable things — pretty and comfortable. She sniffed her way along the perfume counter. It was lovely here: white jars of cream and gay boxes of powders, and metal cases, slim and shining, and pyramids of sweet-smelling soaps, and bottles — hundreds,

thousands of bottles — little squat bulging ones, and tall spear-like ones, and square ones sealed with gold and labeled with black and pink. They were all very fragrant and lovely, but Aunt Nellie had them, cream and powder and everything. So that was that.

She caught sight of the elevator and rushed over and fell in just before it started up. It was very warm and full, and her face was squashed against the back of a fat lady in a fur coat. The fur tickled and smelt sort of funny when you were right in it. The fat lady gripped herself and held her breath loudly as they shot up . . .

'We're prisoners huddled in a horrible dungeon,' thought Joan, her hat knocked on one side and her face buried in fur. 'Everybody's panting for water and the fat lady in front of me may swoon any moment. Our heads are all going to be cut off. We're aristocrats in the French war. The lady in front of me is a Duchess, but very brave — that's why she's only heaving and not yelling — and we're all going ——'

The elevator stopped with a jerk at the third floor and Joan was spilled forth with sundry other members of the French nobility.

'Free!' she observed cheerfully. 'The Lord sent an angel in the middle of the night and he burst open the door — selah!' She stood for a moment looking about undecidedly, hands in pockets and hat tipped over one eye. 'Underwear,' she noted briefly. It was, in more polite phraseology, the Lingerie Section of the Ladies' Clothing Department, Hollis & Son — 'We Exist to Serve' — an agreeable little sentiment without much foundation.

She ambled over to the drinking-fountain and imbibed deeply and lengthily while three ladies waited patiently in a row for her to be through. After that she retreated to the corner and dried her face on the edge of her petticoat and pulled up her stockings. Then she emerged ready for action!

A certain display caught her roaming eye. She advanced and surveyed it with interest. 'What pretty pants!' she observed. Now here was something lovely and comfortable, and useful into the bargain. Nice lacy pants with pink ribbons. Aunt Nellie would love them — so would Aunt Winnie — so, indeed, would Valerie-Maud. For a moment Joan was rashly inclined to buy pants for everybody! But she soon discarded the notion; it would be sort of monotonous, and, besides, it wasn't much fun to get everything at once.

She ran a critical eye over the display, dabbling her fingers in the lace as if it were foam. The fluffy lavender ones were the nicest — the color of lilac in spring. Aunt Nellie liked lilac — she loved them with her eyes . . .

A limp saleswoman trailed over from the corset counter, sniffing uneasily because she had lost her handkerchief. Joan became very important. 'One pair,' she stated clearly. And then, as an after-thought: 'The largest size, please.' She tucked the parcel under her arm with the bag of celery, had another long drink at the fountain, and then fell into the elevator again and sailed triumphantly down to the first floor.

And now for Justine! Something bright and gay and dashing for Justine. She found a table of scarfs, woolly ones striped with crimson and black and purple and orange and green.

The Duchess was there, choosing one. She looked a little bit anxious, wavering between two thoughts . . . She was holding a thin, narrow scarf and a wide one, thick and fringed, and the price tags were side by side. She considered them very seriously, biting her lip. And then she laid down the thin scarf and folded the thick, fringed one and handed it to the salesgirl. And the Duchess's face was suddenly happy. Joan smiled at her across the table. 'They're pretty, aren't they?' she said. 'Beautiful,' agreed the Duchess. 'Beautiful, dearie . . .' And she nodded and buttoned up her smelly fur coat . . .

Joan bought an orange and black one for Justine after she had tried on most of the others to see what they looked like. And then she had another drink and wandered out into the street again.

Bryce would be the next one to provide for. Candy — chocolates, big creamy ones with fat cherries in their middles. She had planned them yesterday. Bryce was so important now that there wasn't anything much left to get him except things to eat. But they would always do — even Harvard couldn't make Bryce rise above nice things to eat . . .

And after that came Father. Joan scurried off to a bookshop round the corner. It was an enchanting place, full of quietness and leisure even at Christmas time because the people who came here weren't looking for bargains in underclothing; they were looking for beautiful thoughts . . .

Joan put her parcels on the edge of a table and walked slowly beside the shelves. A bookshop was a place of friends, old friends. They were all about you in the quietness — Lancelot — Peter Pan — Arthur with his shining sword — hundreds and hundreds of them, whole worlds of friends. And others waiting for you to know, waiting to tell you things in secret . . .

There was a lovely book for Father. All about the Orient with wonderful dreaming pictures, and a cover as blue as the sky. He would love it; he would never grow tired of losing himself in the pictures. Such a happy book. She picked up all her parcels and left the bookshop quietly — the bookshop of beautiful thoughts and old friends.

And now the last of all; now for the Earls!

Joan made her way briskly to Woolworth's. The eight dollars and thirty-four cents had dwindled amazingly; the Earls would have to be satisfied with simpler gifts. It was a pity, but it couldn't be helped.

There was a picture for Aunt Winnie. That would be

nice! A picture of a little girl saying her prayers in a long trailing nightgown, with angels popping out of the darkness at the back. Rather silly-looking angels with curls and wings and bare feet and even a harp or two. All very holy and a trifle goofy. And the bed was painted crooked — it seemed to be slipping out of the frame. But Aunt Winnie would love it; she would think it most awfully sweet. And she would be quite, quite sure to think that the little girl looked like Val!

And for Val herself there was a little round box of powder that smelt rather queer and promised on the lid not to hurt the complexion. She hoped it was a truthful lid because Val had such a lovely complexion, and she was so fond of it.

And lastly there was Hector B. Justine had suggested getting a rattle; that was like Justine. But she wanted something pretty and kind. Now a tie would do, green and brown stripes because he had a new brown suit. And so disarmingly cheap — only ten cents! She grew lavish and paid a little more to have it done up nicely in a long box covered with holly. And so that was that!

She ambled out into the street again, laden with small packages in wrappings of various shades and qualities. A little farther down she encountered a familiar but ever-delightful animal shop — a place of wonder and fun and sadness all mixed up together. The windows were full of fluffy, sleepy puppies with round eyes and drooping ears, and little birds in stacked-up cages, and tiny bits of mice with very long, very pink tails. All shut up — shut up ——

Joan pressed her nose against the glass and watched them, sympathetic and absorbed. Poor little animals! Wouldn't it be lovely to rush in suddenly and open everything up, all the little boxes and all the little cages — open them up wide like doors . . . She stood dreaming against the window, planning freedom for puppies and birds and mice . . .

The shopping crowd swarmed behind her, growing tired

and ill-humored with the waning afternoon. Some one dropped a parcel and became tearfully shrill with vexation as if the world bore her a personal grudge — and some one else spanked her little boy for lagging behind — and the little boy wept loudly and wearily, licking his tears as they rolled down. A shopping crowd drained of enthusiasm!

After a while Joan went into the store to see the other animals that were kept along the walls. She squatted down on the floor and poked her finger through the wiring and made chatty, clucking sounds like a little hen. A lady, who had just bought a canary for her husband so that she would have something cheerful round the house while he was away, patted her head benevolently and said, 'Tweetums!' without clearly indicating to whom she was speaking . . .

Joan suddenly bethought her of the celery and rummaged about for it and broke off a crisp, ivory-grooved stick plumed with wet leaves. Then she offered it to everything within range of her arm. The mice weren't interested; neither were the birds; and the puppies thought it was something to play with.

'Eat,' prompted Joan. 'It's nice; we all like it.' One small Airedale took her advice and yummed excitedly without getting anywhere. In the end he dribbled it all out and looked reproachful! 'It's your teeth, dear,' Joan explained. 'When you grow up you'll be able to do it.'

She gathered together her parcels and wandered leisurely toward the door. Then she stopped and felt in her pockets and her purse. Seventeen cents; that was all. You probably couldn't buy anything much in the way of an animal for seventeen cents. There were the mice, of course; they were little, and cheap, perhaps. She considered the practicability of asking for seventeen cents' worth of mice. But she decided against it. You might have to get a full dozen of them, or a pound, or however it was they sold mice. She straight-

ened her hat and pulled up her stockings and sauntered into the street again.

Well, now for home. Everything was finished up in fine style, everybody settled. And they were lovely presents, all of them, from the frilly pants to the brown and green tie. She trotted along briskly until the shopping crowd was left behind and a quiet, snow-muffled avenue stretched out through the blue dusk. Lights were coming on now, pale and frosty like faded stars, all down the darkening street. And soon there would be a winter moon carved out of white ice — a half-moon holding the sky . . .

Joan began to walk slowly, dragging her feet in the snow, humming, and sucking the elastic band of her small round hat.

'This war,' announced Mr. Blair impressively as if he were opening a meeting, 'this war is an outrage against civilization!'

Nellie shook her head sadly and helped herself to more cream. 'Shocking,' she murmured with tranquil distress.

'It's absurd,' contributed Justine; 'but quite natural. War — if you're going to accept history as the basis of opinion — is the groundwork of mankind; peace is a sort of veneer. It's bound to rub off every now and so often. Such is the quaintness of life!'

'Don't be silly, dear,' said Nellie. 'More pudding, Bryce?'

'It's an outrage,' repeated Mr. Blair as if he were hammering the fact firmly into their consciousnesses. 'I only trust it will not extend to the East. It would be most unfortunate, most disastrous, should such treasures as the pyramids, for instance, be destroyed or even marred in the slightest degree.'

'Oh, I don't think it will get there,' Bryce assured him. 'The East is pretty well out of it, I guess, like us.'

Mr. Blair nodded gratefully. He was always pleased — and a trifle surprised — when a remark of his developed into anything like a discussion.

'The pyramids,' Justine declared breezily, 'make me laugh! They are so amusingly simple. I can always imagine millions of little Egyptians hopping about the desert looking for stones out of which to make a nice big pile for posterity to stare at!'

Mr. Blair bristled with indignation, and then subsided into a hurt and resentful silence. The pyramids, the marvel of the ages, the treasures of a rich and glorious past; defying time and defying reproduction. A slur on the pyramids was a slur on grandeur itself!

Justine narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. 'There's a tremendous lot of convention in this clinging to the past, y'know. Take the classic pieces in our studio — practically every one of them stout, stodgy, and dimpled. Consider Venus — why, she's rolling in fat! Apparently the Greeks never had a thin inspiration ——'

'Dear!' murmured Nellie uneasily.

'Mercury's rather good, jolly good, in fact. But the others are simply living on their reputations. People cling to 'em for the sake of the good old times — God bless 'em! They talk about Greece in awed voices and pant with emotion before dumpy, armless statues and battered relics three times overweight — or piles of stones, whichever the case may be!'

'You're a bright one to embark upon an artistic career,' observed Bryce. 'Why don't you branch off into cartoons?'

'Because Monsieur would perish of the shock, poor dear; and, besides, there *are* Mercurys here and there, and they act as a stimulus. Furthermore, I feel bound to live up to my ability — please say something nice and tasteful, it's such a splendid opportunity!'

'Silence is the better part of valor,' observed Bryce.

'Oh, very well — then you might take the cream away from Mother; she is growing sleeker and plumper every minute.'

'Justine, I do wish you wouldn't be ——'

'So rude. Exactly! But I can't help it, dearest; I must have inherited it from Roger. He was so beautifully and bravely rude. Anyhow, you ought to begin to economize on things like cream. Suppose *we* should trot into the war!'

'Oh, but we shan't, dear, of course.' Very comfortable and serene.

'Well,' said Bryce slowly, 'if it keeps on going we might — I don't suppose so — but still, we might ——'

'Oh, no, darling, not America. We haven't got anything to do with it, you know.'

'Well, neither had Canada, if it comes to that. But she's in it.'

Nellie stirred her coffee reflectively. 'I expect she had to, Bryce. England, you know — she'd have to do what England told her, wouldn't she?'

'No. She *wanted* to; she volunteered — she offered herself right off the bat. There's a Canadian chap up at college who's crazy to get into it. He's going to lie about his age in the spring — if it's still going on. Lots of them are doing that, of course.'

Nellie was quite shocked. She had never thought of any one wanting to go to war. She had supposed their kings just forced them into it by passing a law or something of that sort. But *wanting* to! 'Why, it's not natural!' she exclaimed disapprovingly. 'It's — it's really inhuman! How can a boy want to kill, Bryce?'

'Oh, he doesn't. He hates to think about it; he's even afraid of it, I suppose.'

'But you said he wanted to, dear.'

'No, he doesn't want to kill — he just wants to get into it.'

'But, dear, if he's in it he'll have to kill, won't he?'

'Yes, of course; but the killing's a means to an end — he thinks about the end, not the means. He just can't keep out of it.'

'Oh, I see,' said Nellie vaguely, which meant that she didn't.

'I sincerely trust that the whole affair will be concluded in the near future,' began Mr. Blair with the air of one who has arrived at such a desire by a course of intricate reasoning. 'But if it isn't it would seem almost imperative that we assist in some manner.'

'But, William, this is America, not Europe — we have nothing to do with it.'

'Belgium!' said Mr. Blair briefly.

'Yes, of course, dear . . .' Nellie felt very badly about poor little Belgium. 'But, after all, it *is* their war!'

'Three cheers for the Monroe Doctrine!' exclaimed Justine affably. 'But personally I'd rather like to get into it, to paint, y'know. Gory battle-fields and shattered peasants — there must be no end of material for a sensitive artist like myself. Now a green corpse, say, draped over ——'

'Justine!' implored Nellie weakly. The mention of a corpse always made her feel unwell — especially when she was eating.

'Why doesn't some one stop the war?' asked Joan.

'Oh, they can't, darling. It's too big a thing to be stopped.'

'But isn't there any one, any one at all, to see how silly it is?'

'Sure; I do,' said Justine crisply.

'Once it's started it's got to go on for a bit,' Bryce observed. 'About the only place to stop a war is before it begins.'

'Oh, that Kaiser . . .' exclaimed Nellie, who liked to personalize all discords so that she would have somebody definite to blame!

'I wrote him a letter,' remarked Joan, licking the cream off her spoon.

'You what, dear?'

'I wrote the Kaiser a letter.'

Justine grinned delightedly. 'What was it — advice?'

'Oh — just things.'

Nellie looked very serious. 'Joan, what did you write; and whatever made you do it?'

'Well, perhaps he won't get it, but I thought I'd try. It was only a weenie letter . . .'

'To whom did you address it, my dear?'

'Kaiser William, Berlin, Germany; and I put "Don't bother to return" on the back.'

'And what were the contents?' demanded Mr. Blair severely. Promiscuous correspondence with royalty was somewhat outside of his approval.

'It wasn't anything much, really and truly. I just said: "Dear Sir, if you can make your country stop fighting, won't you please do it? I am very sorry for you because you must be terribly unhappy. Your friend, Joan Blair." And I used my best pink note-paper with the pansies on top.'

Nellie was shocked afresh. 'Oh, Joan! How could you, darling! *Friend* — to the Kaiser!'

Joan licked her spoon thoughtfully. 'I'm sorry for him,' she said 'and the people I am sorry for are my friends.'

3

THE Monday after Christmas, Justine succeeded in carrying Bryce off to inspect the studio.

'You must come along,' she insisted. 'All the others have no end of admiring relatives who swoop down on them from time to time and babble with enthusiasm — it's the hook most of them hang their hopes on, poor dears! But I'm shockingly neglected. Now and again Aunt Win creaks

forth in the morbid anticipation of discovering us doing something wicked and artistic — and she always admires the wrong things in a loud, pleased voice, and talks about Hector's Mamma who was given to the making of wool flowers — Lord help her! Hector's parents always sound so quaint, don't they? The kind that say, "My love, the marmalade," and wear flannel nightdresses and an air of perpetual surprise. Too bad they didn't hang on a bit longer; they would have been so amusing to poke . . .'

'I'll go; but I absolutely decline to babble!' stated Bryce firmly.

'Well, you needn't — although it's simple enough, Heaven knows! You stare at something rather stupid and say, "Oh-oh-o-o-o, how lov-el-y" in a voice limp with admiration. And the creator blushes and frequently giggles, and Monsieur curses you for a damned fool under his breath. It's really better, I suppose, to be like Aunt Win. She's so hopelessly off key that she becomes an object of speculation. Pity and scorn are swallowed up in wonder!'

'She's a good sort,' observed Bryce with the benign air of patting a cat.

'Sure she is. When people are frank about their foolishness it isn't half bad — it's when they try to gloss it over that the effect becomes irritating. In fact, I'm rather inclined to believe that the world is divided into two classes: those who are fools, and those who are trying to pretend that they aren't.'

'And which section do I grace?'

'My dear — a Harvardian! Is it necessary to say? The last class, plus — if you gather my meaning.'

'Perfectly, thanks. And you?'

Justine reflected. 'I expect I shall have to enlarge my category, but I don't quite know how. A third class, say, for people like Roger, and Monsieur, and Joan probably — and myself possibly. And now run off and get dressed, and

wear your speckled tie, there's a dear — it's so cheerfully violent!'

On their way to the studio they encountered Valerie-Maud and Joan and Lancelot-Pan-Shelley, a small and chubby dog who was a medley of breeds, but one in devotion. Joan had received him at Christmas from an enterprising little boy who picked things up around the streets and gave them away as presents. He specialized in kittens and abandoned chinaware; and he was the one weak spot in an otherwise impeccable family armor.

'Say — can we come?' asked Valerie-Maud, who was in a continual state of yearning since Bryce's return, and craved only the privilege of trailing at his heels.

'Sure,' agreed Justine cheerfully. 'I always have believed that there's nothing more impressive than a mob. Well, now, onward, Christian soldiers — step up briskly, and you, Val, don't begin to pelt Bryce with devotion. I want to talk to him myself.'

They proceeded down the street, the latest additions to the party trotting along behind with the bright expectancy of ones who know not where they are being led.

'Now, then,' began Justine crisply, 'I have only one request to make, and that is, for the Lord's sake, don't flaunt your superiority and dole out words of advice with a fatherly air. You must remember that we are an artistic, high-strung, sensitive crowd, and the slightest thing jars, darling, jars horribly!'

'You ought to be an artist,' observed Bryce good-naturedly, 'if it's only to keep you from developing into a soap-box orator. What do you want me to do — beam upon every one and chirp with enthusiasm?'

'Certainly not. Forget your background and act tastefully — and be enormously nice to Monsieur or I'll never

forgive you . . . Look at that animal! Hey, Joan, call your pup off the road. Naughty, naughty Shakespeare, you mustn't gambol around cars; it irritates them!'

'Lancelot,' ordered Joan firmly, 'come here, dear.' She spanked him affectionately and gave him a peanut out of her pocket.

When they entered the studio, Monsieur came padding across the room to greet them in his rumpled blue smock and felt slippers. '*Bonjour, bonjour!*' he cried, waving his hand airily.

'Hello; here we are,' announced Justine. 'And a good old mix-up, I must say!' She slipped her arm through Monsieur's. 'Now I'll start introducing every one. This tall and elegant youth is my brother of whom you have heard much and surmised more, probably. He's being ground through the mills of Harvard — hooray, rah, rah, and cheers! Smile prettily for sister, Bryce.'

Monsieur bowed, and his eyes crinkled up at the corners. 'She is always the same, *n'est-ce pas?*' he remarked. 'Ver' full of words and laughter.'

'Rather!' agreed Bryce. 'We haven't found any system of squashing her yet; have you?'

'*Non, mon ami.* She start — and that is all there is about it!'

'Oh, tush! You mustn't discuss me before myself. And now, to continue: this child with the nice eyes is a — let me see — step-sister I think you call it. Confound these family complications! I'm always getting balled up in them! Anyhow, name's Joan, and a good kid on chatty terms with the Creator. The animal draped over her arm is Shakespeare, who has a passion for defying motorists and drinking puddles ——'

'How do you do,' inserted Joan crisply. 'He's a little boy dog and mostly Airedale.'

Monsieur patted him gently. 'A fine leetle fellow, to be sure. But from where did he get so long a tail?'

'He grew it,' explained Joan proudly. 'He has the longest tail of any dog on our street!'

'And this,' continued Justine with an airy gesture, 'is Valerie-Maud Earl, the beloved daughter of the lady who blows in upon us occasionally and cheers every one up. Her grandmam, you will recall, was devoted to wool flowers. And she is devoted to Bryce — affection seems to run in the family.'

Monsieur bowed again. 'I am mos' pleased to 'ave you come.' He said it graciously. He might have been a great host, and she a great visitor.

Justine tossed her hat onto Mercury and unwound the black and orange scarf. 'Where's Hell — oh, I see her. Say, Hell, come over here and meet what I've brought along.'

Wilhelmina strolled over obligingly. She was tall and lank with a smell of bacon and an air of determined bravado. 'Hullo,' she drawled coolly. 'Which are Blythes and which are Blairs?'

'The Blythes are the beautiful ones!' confided Bryce.

'He's grown so coy,' Justine deplored. 'That's the sort of thing he's always saying now —— Your collar's undone, darling. Get a pin behind that wretched landscape. Good Lord, *isn't* it wretched! What is the matter with her sky, Monsieur? Are those pimples supposed to be stars?'

Monsieur surveyed it sadly. 'She 'ave worked over that with all she 'ave in 'er — but she 'ave not enough, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Evidently not, poor dear. All her work is so depressingly earnest-looking. It conjures up visions of sleepless nights and dumb yearnings after success.'

'Full of the spirit and minus the letter,' declared Wilhelmina with the air of one who makes a casually brilliant observation. 'And who's the blonde child?'

'I'm an Earl,' announced Valerie-Maud with a certain complacency.

'See — nobility!' commented Justine airily. 'We mingle freely with all classes. Hey, Joan, call your pup before he swallows something important. I never beheld such an animal — he eats whatever he bangs into with the most vulgar enthusiasm!'

'Well, he's hungry,' defended Joan. 'Everybody's vulgar when they're hungry.'

'There you are!' exclaimed Bryce. 'Out of the mouths of babes!'

Monsieur fluttered his long, slender fingers over Lancelot's forehead. 'I 'ave some few leetle cakes in my cupboard,' he said softly. 'Per'aps our frien' who is 'ungry would like to eat them, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Have they any currants in them?' inquired Joan.

Monsieur crinkled up his eyes thoughtfully. 'Now I mus' for a moment reflect. *Non — non*, I think not. Indeed I am mos' sure that my leetle cakes 'ave no currants.'

Joan nodded with satisfaction. 'He doesn't like them,' she explained confidentially. 'He spits them out!'

Wilhelmina strolled back across the room. 'Come and see what I'm doing,' she invited casually over her shoulder. 'It's rather good.'

'Shall I have to admire it?' Bryce asked warily.

Justine laughed. 'My dear, there is nothing on this earth Hell loathes as much as admiration!'

'Exactly!' endorsed Wilhelmina.

And Justine laughed again, with a hint of skepticism.

'Well, now,' said Monsieur, 'we will fin' those leetle cakes, eh? You come with me.' He took Joan's hand and padded off to a slant-roofed alcove curtained apart from the rest of the studio.

'This,' he announced with a flourish of slim fingers, 'this

is my 'ouse. She is ver' small, but I made her jus' right to hold two people and one leetle dog with a long tail. It is mos' fortunate, is it not?' He held back the blue curtain and Joan and Lancelot-Pan-Shelley went in and squatted down comfortably on the floor beside the low window, and watched everything with frank and interested eyes.

The little house was dusty and disordered, and it was full of sunshine and color and full of things that were loved — books grown very limp and shabby, an old rug, copper-hued, a bowl of amber holding amber light, and pictures — pictures like doors in the wall opening up into other worlds . . .

Monsieur sat down on a yellow stool in front of his cupboard and spread out three blue plates the color of an evening sky, and put a frosted cake in the middle of each plate as if he were playing a game. '*Voila!* We shall 'ave a — how-do-you-call-it? — a tea-party, eh?'

'Oh, yes!' cried Joan. 'Let's have a tea-party!'

And Lancelot began to woggle with anticipation.

Monsieur lifted a blue plate, and then paused and frowned very seriously. 'But *ma chère*, we 'ave forgot! It is not the time for a tea-party. My clock, she tells me that it is still only morning!'

'Oh, but *that* doesn't matter,' said Joan quickly. 'It's only *more* fun — doing things out of their real time is always more fun!'

'*Mais oui!*' agreed Monsieur. 'It is indeed so. To 'ave the breakfast in the evening — would not that be fun?'

'Oh! is that what you do, really and truly?'

'Well, not so ver' much, per'aps; but sometimes I become mixed — I forget 'ow the day is — and then there are muddled things in my 'ouse. Why, once,' with an air of great secrecy, 'once I took, what do you think, soup and leetle fishes for my breakfast!'

'Oh!' cried Joan delightedly. 'And what did you do for your dinner?'

Monsieur grew very solemn. 'Then for my dinner, *chérie*, I had to take oatmeal, nothing but oatmeal!' He broke up Lancelot's cake and put the blue plate before him.

Joan sighed regretfully. 'We never do things like that where I live — I wish we did, but we don't.'

'Does nothing then get mixed up in your house?'

She shook her head. 'They like to be the same all the time — they like to always have breakfast for breakfast, especially my father and my Aunt Nellie.'

'But you do not, eh?'

'No, I play — by myself.'

Lancelot gulped a large piece of cake and looked uncomfortable.

'Eat the crumbs, dear,' Joan ordered. 'And don't gobble — we're having a tea-party.'

Monsieur sat silent on his yellow stool gazing out over the white flare of snow, the little things he loved shining about him.

Justine's voice came from across the studio, sharp and confident; and then Bryce's easy laugh. 'Well,' drawled Wilhelmina, 'I don't give a damn . . .'

Joan got up and put the blue plate back on the cupboard.

'Did you make this picture?' she asked, pointing.

Monsieur turned and smiled. 'That leetle one? *Non, mon enfant;* I did not make it.'

'It's pretty, isn't it? I like it.'

'Yes — and I too.'

'Who did make it, Monsieur?'

'A man named Watteau, *chérie;* a man who lived a ver' long time ago — and live still, *ma foi!*'

Joan looked at the picture thoughtfully. 'He could make beautiful things, couldn't he?'

'Yes — he was mos' fortunate, mos' 'appy . . .'

'I would like to make beautiful things,' said Joan; 'but I don't know how to.'

Monsieur stroked his long fingers together, and then laid his hands open on his lap — open and empty. 'There are many who cannot, *chérie*, though it take some a great time to learn it. He could, and others too — but not all . . .' And his face grew very quiet and sad.

Joan leaned up against the cupboard and made a little humming sound under her breath, half song and half musing.

'There are those who do the beeg things,' went on Monsieur quietly and leisurely, 'an' those who do jus' — scraps. Some time you learn which way you are to go, some time you come to see the truth. It is all ver' funny an' sad, *ma petite*, like a game that is mixed — or played all wrong, per'aps.' He sat silent on the yellow stool, looking off into nowhere with faded eyes.

Joan tilted her head thoughtfully. 'Monsieur, do you want to make beautiful things, too — like the little picture?'

'A ver' long time ago — yes. But now I 'ave learned that I cannot make, I can only watch what the others 'ave done. Jus' watch . . .'

'And we can love them,' said Joan. 'If we can't make them, we can love them, can't we, Monsieur?'

'Yes, *chérie*, it is indeed so.'

'Perhaps,' very slowly, 'it is like God. He makes all the biggest things, the ones that matter, and we love them — springs and stars and people, people most of all. We can't make them, only God. But we *love* them . . .' She drifted back into quietness for a moment. And then: 'I guess God's happy when we love them.'

Monsieur nodded very gravely in the flow of morning sunshine, his hands lying open in his lap.

'And everybody,' said Joan, 'everybody in all the world can love the beautiful things.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

MARCH swept over the earth again, ploughing a windy way for spring; and Joan found pussywillows in the woods beyond the farmyard apple tree, and little hard swellings along twigs and low branches. And the sun rose high and the air grew warm and sweet, and underneath the ground things were growing quietly and wisely as they had for a thousand springs . . .

And then one clear and blossoming day there came into Longfellow Street a sudden thrust of news, dagger-like, splintering up the peace and urbanity of a trim little realm.

'Oh, dear!' said Nellie limply — and did hope President Wilson wasn't making a mistake. She liked President Wilson — she liked all the Presidents from an inground sense of duty — and she didn't want to see one of them make a mistake. It was such a really drastic move, plunging a comfortable people into a far-off turmoil, feeding their lives into the mouth of another's war. She felt quite upset when she thought of it — such a very drastic move!

Winnie, after a brief period of astonishment, developed a large and expansive enthusiasm for the whole affair, and championed it with all the briskness of a new convert. 'You see, darling, we simply have to do it — I can quite understand now! Poor Europe must be helped. We'll fix it up in no time; we'll just swamp the Kaiser and that nasty little what-d'you-call-him. And it will be *such* a relief to Europe. You can just imagine how they'll feel, can't you, Nellie? — the poor widows and babies and all. Why, it will be a perfect God-send; that's what it will be — a God-send!' with a great glow of benevolence. 'It will be hard on us for a while, I guess; food and things like that, you know. It always happens with a war. We'll probably be short of food by

summer and have those ration things — and air-raids, darling, I shouldn't be surprised!' Winnie was partial to a little excitement even if it involved discomfort. As a little girl she had climbed apple trees and fallen out regularly, screaming with a sort of fearful delight.

Nellie was unsettled for several days until she had worked out a nice firm view of the whole situation. She went about it with a thoroughness born of experience. Thoughts had to be readjusted, old ideas patted and rounded into new form like so many lumps of clay. And then she emerged once more with all wavering reactions crystallized in conviction!

'We must do it,' she said very earnestly, and with all the importance of one who establishes an entirely new point. 'It isn't our war, dear; we really have nothing to do with it; but we must be brave and generous. We must go to the rescue and stop all this dreadfulness. President Wilson is quite right.' And then she wept a little because it was all such a very sad affair.

And it never occurred to her that she had anything to give — anything to lose. People went to wars, of course; men, strong, soldierly men with grim eyes and determined jaws. Their country summoned them and they rose to answer. Nellie could picture them rising — a race of strong, soldierly men from the heart of America. Not Hector or Mr. Hoppingworth or young Jimmy Colin; but an army of mythical men rising out of a vast obscurity.

'We must go,' said Nellie earnestly; 'we must go to the rescue!' And she felt quite stirred and affected.

Mr. Blair also thought they should go. He argued it out lengthily at meal-times, working his way to a conclusion through a morass of words. 'To remain longer apart' — very pompous and concentrated — 'would, I fear, incur the scorn and contempt of the civilized world. And who shall say that such would be unwarranted? As far as my own opinions are concerned there is nothing which justifies so

isolated a position. Common humanity demands that we take our part — that we enter the conflict to assist Belgium . . .' And here he would pause and stare thoughtfully at his plate until Nellie prodded him with something cheerful and patriotic.

Mr. Blair liked to muse upon Belgium; it had been the first country to definitely enlist his sympathy, and he still clung to it with a fond tenacity. For one thing, its littleness strongly appealed to him, its touching littleness side by side with the pink sprawl of Germany. And, furthermore, he harbored a respectful admiration for King Albert. A fine and gallant gentleman, a worthy leader of a nation of heroes.

'Assuredly we must go!' declared Mr. Blair. 'We must go to the assistance of Belgium.' And he felt very stern and warlike, and wrote a long letter to the 'Aldington Times.'

'Exactly!' commented Justine with airy approval. 'It gives one such a pleasant feeling of nobility to help clear up somebody else's mess. Personally I want to drive ambulances — it sounds so nicely exhilarating. Or run messages across the battle-fields — or check off the missing! Any handy little job; I'm not particular. Perhaps I'd better get Joan to write to Marshal Foch about it; she's probably on intimate corresponding terms with him by now. Such a convenient child to have around! Anyhow, I'll get a ducky little uniform with fat buttons and tight breeches to show off my legs — what a blessing they're straight! — and I'll cultivate an air of military importance and a grim stride, and mutter devastating things like "To Hell with the Kaiser!" and "Damn Von-this-and-that!" And I'll go in for bugles — oh, my, yes! If the War Department has any sense, which it probably hasn't, it ought to snap me up in a moment, which of course it won't. So there you are — another fine opportunity gone wrong!'

And when she stopped talking, she thought: 'Oh, Lord,

what a mess!' and mused upon the thing which Roger would have done. He would have gone, she felt quite sure of that. He would probably have gone long ago, making up his own mind, leaving by his own choice. Not in a blare of patriotism or silly malice. Roger saw too clearly for that. He wouldn't gild a nasty affair with sentiment, or deck it all out with ribbons of gallantry. And certainly he wouldn't have hated *people*. He would have struck out — not at persons but at ideas; he would have gone in as a workman, not as a hero, clearing away the rubbish of a vast mistake.

Justine liked to think of him doing it, riding ahead coolly and slashing at littleness. Smiling, perhaps — Roger's quiet, crooked smile — because it was all so unutterably silly. And so, 'We must go,' Justine declared, because a 'little' thing had to be settled and Roger Blythe would have been one of the first to help do it.

Hector was exceedingly surprised — Hector always was! He belonged to that class of people which is never prepared for anything to occur outside of the daily routine. He went about for a week or so with a cloud of perplexity resting on his brow, and an air of general unconviction befitting one who has been seriously fooled on several past occasions.

Winnie took in three papers and he read all the editorials and agreed with each in turn, so that the general drift of his views was determined by the nature of what he had last perused . . .

And then after a while he was seized with a new and strange emotion which seemed curiously centered in the pit of his stomach — a fearful anticipation that he might be expected, even called upon, to fight, to go into training, go into battle — shoot — stab — kill! He felt quite bilious with excitement, and began to practice with dumb-bells out in the back shed to strengthen his muscles, and to inhale deeply every morning, holding in his breath until he nearly popped with the exertion.

'Germany must be taught a lesson!' said Hector severely. And then, after the next editorial: 'The world must be made safe!' And he wondered what it would feel like to stick a bayonet through the middle of a fat little Hun.

Joan was mildly impressed with, but not particularly interested in, this latest of world developments. It was evidently only another move in a grown-up game, in a grown-up way of thinking. Wars were queer and unexplainable, like people kicking dogs or throwing stones at birds. It was no good trying to understand them; things like that could never be understood — they could only be wondered at!

Sometimes the little girls of Longfellow Street congregated together and played a new game, carefully devised and enthusiastically carried out under the direction of Valerie-Maud, who joined them with an air of bestowing a great favor upon an inferior species. Usually the little girls were flattered, sometimes they were suspicious, and once or twice they had erupted into rebellion. Valerie-Maud's dictatorship was apt to be more crude and less exhilarating than Justine's.

In the new game they all took the part of somebody or something, which necessitated a preliminary squabble and several huffy withdrawals at the last moment. Two rôles, however, were especially reserved: Valerie-Maud was always the American Army, and Joan was always the Kaiser because nobody else would take the part. The other little girls were divided up into cannons and horses and French, English, and Belgian Armies respectively.

The cannons were the most intricate; they squatted forward with their weight resting on their hands, and made loud, bangy noises when the Allied Armies slapped their behinds. Sometimes, when the locale of the action was abruptly altered, they became battleships and chugged heavily until they were out of breath.

The duties of the horses were less exacting. They galloped

about briskly but aimlessly and made equine noises if they could, and any sort of noises if they couldn't. Sometimes they pinned long curly shavings on their dresses for tails, which gave a gratifyingly realistic touch and distinguished them from the cannon in the heat of battle.

The armies, of course, were the most important. The rôle of an army had to be bitterly fought for and valiantly defended. Only very determined little girls ever got there — the kind who would grow up to be presidents of clubs and social successes.

The Kaiser's was, on the whole, a fairly passive part demanding little but a series of sneers. He had to face everybody and everything quite by himself. He was never permitted to have an army or a cannon or a horse — but instead he had a large paper moustache which fell off from time to time and generally at the crucial moments. He stood on a box in the middle of the lawn while the armies and all their paraphernalia swarmed about him and waved flags. Everybody waved a flag — even the cannon when they came up for air.

It was, without a doubt, the most exhilarating game they had ever devised.

Valerie-Maud stood on the outskirts on the battle-field waiting for everything to get into full swing before she made her momentous entry. 'Look fierce, Joanie,' she dictated with the air of a general. 'And shoot Belgium quick — you're late.'

'Bang!' said Joan half-heartedly, and gave an indifferent imitation of something fierce.

Belgium groaned with unconcealed relish and staggered about in a circle, prolonging the death agonies for the benefit of France who had made rather a specialty of dying in battle and resented any infringement upon her accomplishments.

'Hurry up!' ordered a horse impatiently.

'I won't!' said Belgium, and grew weaker with leisurely satisfaction.

After she had given forth a last great pant and consented to expire, England and France began to act in a peculiar manner intended to indicate extreme consternation.

'Oh, you wicked, wicked old Kaiser!' exclaimed France vindictively. 'I'll get you, I'll cut your old head off, so *there!*'

'*We*,' corrected Valerie-Maud; 'you're a country, Minnie.'

'You think you're awf'ly smart,' roared England. 'Well, just you wait, you crazy old thing! And little Willie too! We'll mash him all up into a powder, so we will!'

'Hooray!' yelled a cannon enthusiastically.

Joan tipped back her paper helmet. 'Then you'd be just as bad as him; if you did that you'd be just as ——'

'Joanie,' commanded Valerie-Maud, 'stop talking and look fierce. Go on — *sneer;* a big sneer!'

Joan glared passively into space.

'What'll we do?' wailed France. 'Somebody come on in and help us — somebody come on in!'

England lifted up her voice and swelled the plea. 'Americer — hey, Americer, come on in!'

They yelled in unison for quite a while, and then the American Army strode into their midst, very cool and collected.

'Hooray, you've come!' observed Belgium, who absentmindedly returned to life from time to time.

'Hello, what's the matter?' asked the American Army with well-assimilated surprise.

'It's that wicked old Kaiser,' explained France plaintively. 'We want to kill him, and he's killing us instead!'

The American Army cast a disdainful eye over the lonely monarch. 'Oh, that's nothing,' it remarked offhandedly. 'You get in behind me and we'll make an attack.'

Every one clustered together and waved flags and hooted derisively.

'Now you're going to get it, you wicked old thing, you . . .'

'We're going to cut your head off — hooray — hooray . . .'

'We're comin'! Now you gotta look out, you old . . .'

Joan took off her moustache and blew her nose. 'Don't step on me,' she requested. 'I'd rather be punched.'

'We're coming!' roared the Allies triumphantly. 'We've got you now — you can't escape!'

'Damn the Kaiser!' yelled a cannon in the excitement of the moment, and then it stopped short and blushed with astonished shame.

And a horse fell over backwards and landed on the pin which attached her tail to her skirt . . .

The armies advanced and surrounded the Kaiser, and the steeds galloped about getting in every one's way and making snarls and meows and grunts and barks, and occasionally lapsing into human speech. And the cannon were spanked right and left, and boomed away for all they were worth.

'We've got you!' announced the American Army grandly. 'We've surrounded you on every side; you can't get away; you can't escape!'

'Hooray!' shouted Belgium, leaning comfortably on her elbow.

'You're dead,' France stated firmly. 'Keep quiet.'

'Keep quiet yourself,' advised Belgium scrappily. 'Hooray, hooray! Go on and kill him!'

The American Army turned and frowned heavily. 'Hey, you! Lie down; you're dead!'

'I've got well again,' explained Belgium cheerfully.

'You can't do that.'

'I can too!'

'Lie down and be dead,' ordered the American Army wrathfully.

Belgium stuck out her tongue.

'I'll come over and slap your face!' warned France with great indignation. 'Keep quiet and *be dead!*'

'Yah — yah!' said Belgium with amiable defiance.

'Shall I shoot her again?' asked the Kaiser.

'All right,' agreed the irate victor. 'Hey, you, stand up; you're going to be shot over.'

Belgium arose brightly.

'Say, that's not fair,' protested France. 'She's died once already. You never shoot me more than once — it's not fair!'

'Mind your own business,' retorted Belgium briskly. 'Come on, Joanie — shoot me!'

'No, I'll do it,' decided France, and she slapped the behind of an available cannon who made a loud and impressive bang. And Belgium died all over again with an air of triumphant enjoyment.

'Well, now,' began the American Army, turning her attention once more to the royal captive, 'we've got you, old Kaiser Bill, and we're going to finish you this time ——'

Joan tipped back her helmet. 'Listen here! I'm going to make a speech.'

'You can't,' said England. 'Prisoners don't make speeches.'

'Well, I'm going to, so there!' — very determined and final.

'Make it wicked then,' suggested the American Army. 'And sneer while you're saying it.'

Joan removed her moustache and took a deep breath. 'My dear countries,' she began clearly. 'Don't you ever make a war ——'

'Hooray!' exclaimed Belgium from sheer perversity.

'Shut up!' commanded France.

'Don't you ever make a war,' repeated Joan. 'It's awful; it hasn't got any sense — and things that haven't got any sense aren't any good.'

'Make it wicked,' reminded the American Army. 'You're the Kaiser, remember — you've got to be wicked.'

Joan crinkled her eyes reflectively. 'But it's silly more than it's wicked; anybody who makes a war must be, oh, terribly silly! And now hurry up and kill me if you want to.'

The cannons advanced and squatted down in front of her, and all the armies slapped them emphatically and in unison. There was a prolonged bang (in which Belgium joined in heartily) and the Kaiser toppled over off the box, and then sat up again after a moment, tranquilly chewing a blade of grass.

2

THE first frail loveliness of April was deepening and swelling. After each dusk when the sky flowered into white stars, things came up through the darkness and silence and unfolded with the dawn. Apple trees out in the gardens bubbled with silver and rose; the night winds were channels for fragrance and the day winds were streams of spring warmth; and all down the long street old elms were stamping green shadows on green and daffodiled lawns. The tide of the season flowed slowly up. Scillas and snowdrops and crocuses whitened and purpled the ground for a space, and then they were lost in a new wave of bloom . . .

'Spring — spring —' thought Nellie, and her heart grew half-gay and half-wistful, for spring was an old voice telling an old, old tale. In a little while lilacs would come again; the bushes beyond the sunflower shafts would tumble and surge with them; calling — calling out memories of a dim, sweet past . . . Nellie was quiet when she thought of the lilacs, and sadness flowed through her like a deep stream, carrying off all the little things that gathered about to clog her love. And when she was quiet Roger seemed to come near and to stand just beyond the reach of her wistfulness — Roger, who

had always been more than half-wistful, who had always reached out with empty hands . . .

And while the days were turning new leaves of loveliness and a country was spurring itself for war, Bryce dropped casually in again on his spring vacation.

'You must rest, darling,' Nellie insisted over and over in a smooth creamy voice. 'You must rest up for all those dreadful exams.' And she fluttered about in her new green voile, and whipped up frothy, effeminate little desserts, and arranged sprays of pink flowers all over the house, and felt very busy and happy and proud, except when her thoughts went straying like little ships out on a sea of memory.

Bryce looked tired and rather nervous, and he ate the desserts and admired the flowers with an air of moody preoccupation.

'He's been working so hard,' declared Nellie, and she found a new cook book which specialized in sloppy, nourishing dishes for overworked people. She wasn't very fond of cooking; but she was very fond of Bryce . . .

3

In a blue-misted twilight Justine and Bryce strolled leisurely off for the woods beyond Wimble Street. It was quiet out, the mellow quietness of evening, and a new moon, like a shred of white cloud, was blowing up over the trees.

Justine threw back her head and watched it for a moment, then turned again to the shadowy street. 'I dislike looking at the sky,' she remarked; 'it makes me feel so ridiculous.'

Bryce swung along beside her in silence, his eyes staring thoughtfully through the thickening dusk. A slow spring wind ruffled coolly against his face, the breath of a garden and a woodland.

Justine glanced up at him a little quizzically. 'What's the matter with you, anyhow? In love again?'

'Oh, good Lord!' He puffed his pipe into a sudden red glow.

'Well, don't get offended — it's only a sort of benevolent interest on my part. I'm always looking forward to the time when I'll have a whole tribe of cute little nephews and nieces to take to the movies.'

'Pessimist!'

'Oh, I don't know about that. Other people's children, like other people's delusions, are often quite amusing, I expect.'

'And what do you intend to do all your days — go around using other people's things?'

'If they appeal to me. But I'll handle them very kindly and carefully, like a borrowed tea-pot, say.'

Bryce puffed thoughtfully. 'Well, that's your idea. Personally, I expect to keep to my own.'

'Of course you will,' agreed Justine crisply. 'I can just see you going through life collecting all sorts of little comforts — wife, offspring, respect of the community, and so on — and fighting for them with the most dogged nobility. Or upholding, rather; fighting is a somewhat strenuous term. You have enough of Mother in you for that — the let's-settle-down-and-be-comfortable instinct. It'll expand as you begin to jell.'

'Very astute — and what about yourself?'

Justine narrowed her eyes reflectively. 'Oh, I don't want anything much, that is, not just *things* — money and family and the rest of the paraphernalia. Certainly not children; that must be perfectly dismal. Imagine having us, Bryce!'

'Well, what's the matter with us?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary, I suppose — but think of *having* us! What an awful responsibility!'

'If it comes to that,' said Bryce slowly, 'I don't see that any one is responsible for us except ourselves.'

'Yes, that's true enough — but *they* don't know it. Look

at Mother. She brought us here, and she's never got over the fact. She thinks she understands us inside and out — or pretends that she does. And why? Because she feels she ought to, poor dear; it's probably what she would call "natural." As a matter of fact, we're perfect enigmas to her, puzzles, muddles, anything you want to call it. She skims affectionately round us and feeds us with tasty slops, and makes up in imagination what she lacks in discernment!'

'Well, I don't see how she can be expected to understand us, if, for the most part, we can't even understand ourselves.'

'Oh, but that's just what she ought to do. I'm not blaming her, she can't help it, Heaven knows; but that is the only thing that would be of much use. If we understood ourselves clearly, it wouldn't matter how other people looked at it. They could have a dozen fool opinions — it wouldn't touch us. Some people have got there, I suppose: Roger — and Monsieur sees a lot — and Joan comes out with the clearest things every now and then. But look at us . . .'

'Well, I expect we'll get there too some day — or give it up as a bad job; one or the other.'

'Every one,' declared Justine firmly, 'ought to spring forth full grown like Minerva; growing-up is such a nerve-racking affair.'

'It's a precious muddle,' agreed Bryce.

'Just so — in spite of all the poetic blurb people write about it, and talk too. They used to blow in upon us at school and gurgle away for all they were worth — Heir of the Ages, Glorious Youth, on the Threshold of Life, and so on and so forth with no end of gush. You would think we were daisies about to burst into bloom!'

'Still — there is a little something in all that . . .'

'Oh, yes, I know that. In fact, to be perfectly candid, I could get quite worked up over it if I wanted to. We're young, and we've got all life before us — as the lady lecturers say — and we're clear-headed enough except when it

comes to ourselves. From one angle it's all rather exhilarating and splendid. But what about the rest of it? The periodic spells of wanting to know everything — and knowing nothing. Wondering what the whole business is about — especially what we're about! I tell you, I'll be damned glad to come to some sort of conclusion.'

'Ditto — and how do you suppose we arrive at it?'

'Hum, I wonder. Perhaps you fall into it same way you fall into — this. I'd rather feel it was up to us, though; there's a certain satisfaction in digging your own way through anything.'

Bryce stared thoughtfully down the long gray road. A gold star wavered above the blurred mass of trees at the end . . .

'I suppose,' he said musingly, 'I suppose we're bound to come out somewhere — to find something definite.'

Justine nodded. 'That's it — something *definite.* Everything we have now, Dulcie, Jimmy, all of us, is so hazy and theoretical. We say things, and think things, but they're all sort of — what-d'you-call-it? — abstract, without any particular meaning. We want something and we're making a big noise about it, and getting nowhere worth mentioning.'

'Because we don't know what we want.'

'Just so; that's what the whole thing hovers round. Now take Dulcie. To hear her talk you'd think no one had ever been young in the world before. She's simply puffed out with problems and yearnings. She doesn't know what she wants — so she's trying everything to find out. It seems an awful waste of time and energy.'

'But she may tumble onto something.'

'Nothing more vital than a husband, if she keeps up her present programme.'

'Well, then, after she's run the gamut of experiments she'll probably be satisfied.'

'Satisfied with dissatisfaction? That isn't logical.'

'All right; then suppose you give your view of the situation.'

'I haven't any in particular. She may fall — as the saying goes — in one of her bursts of enthusiasm; or she may die down like an engine, and then start all over again with a clearer stock of ideas. As far as I can see, the matter with Dulcie is that she's looking for something she won't have to work for. She expects bliss to descend from heaven and perch upon her shoulder like a dove. And besides, she's so *general* — well, we all are, if it comes to that. You know how she goes on about wanting "to see life," "know life." She's terrifically keen over it all — but what on earth *is* this life she's out to interview? How can she see it and know it and all the rest, until she finds out what it is! I don't call dashing off to a second-rate road-house "seeing life." It's simply going somewhere, making more or less of a fool of yourself, and coming home again. And where in the devil has that got you?'

'It's a certain phase of the whole,' said Bryce. 'If you want to know it all, you have to know that.'

'But where does it get you? It isn't as if Dulcie enjoyed it immensely; she doesn't — she even admits as much in her more lucid moments. There's a certain kick, I suppose; but for the most part she goes along with an air of determined bravado and looseness. She's bound she'll be free and brave and splendidly daring; she glows with a sort of lofty excitement when she talks about her own wildness. It impresses her far more than it does any one else.'

'If she doesn't enjoy it she won't keep it up long,' Bryce ventured.

'Possibly not. But there again, think of the waste!'

'She'll have the experience.'

'How quaint — and what will she do with it?'

'Experience occasionally matures into wisdom.'

'Hm! — occasionally!'

'And, anyhow, it's a sort of pin for the next balloon to burst on.'

'Very pretty.'

'Don't mention it. But I'm not talking altogether out of my hat, Justine . . .'

'Well, then, I wish you'd talk to Dulcie. But you won't, of course; you'll only make love to her! By the way, I do hope all my dear little nephews and nieces aren't coming from *that* quarter?'

'Get some of your own,' advised Bryce casually. 'I'm in no hurry.'

'Don't be coarse, dearest. But I'm glad your affections are still dangling. Dulcie would be such a turbulent sort of sister-in-law. For instance, look at the way she's forever chatting about having sufferings and tragedies — it's quite poignant. She ends up all her speeches with "I'm not afraid of paying!" — and then she gazes earnestly off into space.'

'Well, I'm not afraid either,' said Bryce. 'If you are, you're done for; there's nothing left but to sit beside the fire and mould.'

'Good Lord! I'm not a domesticated cat myself. But I want to know that I'm paying up for something at least halfway worth while. Sorrow for the mere sake of sorrow is sheer silliness. Dulcie talks as if she'd be willing to do any little shabby thing just to have the privilege of suffering for it! The best thing for her would be a nice wholesome scare. She'd probably wilt right down into a surprised relief; or a —— Oh, I don't know. What's the good of talking! I suppose she'll come out somewhere too, in her own way . . .'

Bryce slouched along, his face clear-cut against the shadowy trees. The stars were above them now, pebbling the sky with gold. They were sharp and beautiful between the laced fingers of the wood.

After a while Justine began to talk again, slowly and

quietly, as Justine seldom talked. 'I suppose every one of us has something to sort of hang onto — something we've got from ourselves or another person, a book, perhaps . . . I have what Roger told us. Remember it — the littleness in life you despise and laugh at; the bigness you reach for always and always!'

'What does that mean to you?' asked Bryce.

Justine was silent a moment. 'I don't quite know yet. I say it and I believe it — but what is the bigness? It meant something to Roger, but it's nothing in particular to me. Look at us — we go along every day and find — what? A whole mass of — well, trivial things, odds and ends, with nothing outstandingly big or little. If you saw a man beating a woman, you'd go over and punch him — and that would be that! But you don't see things of that sort, not here.'

'There are a damned lot of trivial things to keep you busy,' observed Bryce. 'If you come out of them without being a rotter or a pious prig, you're doing pretty well.'

Justine snapped off a leaf and chewed the stem. 'Well, of course you have more of that sort of thing than I have. But what we need, every last one of us, is something big, really big, to test ourselves out on.'

'I expect,' said Bryce quietly, 'that we all get it sooner or later.'

'I wonder what Roger had,' Justine mused. 'He must have had something; he wouldn't teach us words without a meaning . . .'

They walked on through the evening silence and through the deep serenity of spring until the path curved back into the long gray road once more, and the farmhouse of the creamy-haired family stood out blackly against the sky. The wind ran steadily through their hair and pressed coolly into their eyes; and far off ahead of them, beyond and beyond the pebbling of golden stars, was a billow of clouds — night clouds holding the morrow's rain.

Bryce knocked his pipe with a half-impatient gesture — and the click of sound dropped like a penny in the quietness. 'By the way,' he remarked casually; 'has it ever occurred to you that I have something right here to test myself on?'

Justine looked up quickly. 'You mean — the war?'

He nodded.

'Well, I've been wondering when you'd wake up to it; what made you?'

He was silent a moment; and then: 'That Canadian chap from college, the one I told you about, was killed last month — blown to bits in some silly little skirmish. It seems sickening, like something dirty out of a nightmare. I rather think it woke several of us up — several of us who have been wobbling. Anyhow — Jimmy and I are going.'

'When?'

'Next month; we have it planned.'

Justine strolled along easily, her face shadowed and turned to the dim-traced road. And then: 'What does it feel like, Bryce?' she asked.

'All rather hazy,' he confessed. 'Jimmy's tremendously enthusiastic — talks about bayoneting people and wallowing through slime as if it were some sort of game. Bluff, I suppose; he hates to see anything get hurt . . .'

'And what about you? Doesn't this sort of gather together all your stray ends and tie them up with a bow! You've got something to do; something definite to get into, at any rate.'

'Yes — but I may not get out again; that's the one hitch!'

'Are you afraid?'

'No — not particularly. I'd a damn sight rather be killed that way than mellow down into a flabby, purring old age. And, besides, it's doing something of importance.'

'What's your idea of importance, Bryce?'

'Something that leaves an impression, I think; a smudge

or a cleanness on life in general . . . It doesn't matter much to any one what I think about myself — but it matters a devil of a lot whether we win this war! It's simply a case of the universal swamping the personal for a time. Perhaps, in helping to clear the one, you find the solution to the other.'

Justine kicked a stone out of the way. 'I wish to Heaven I could get into it — but a fat chance I have! War, as far as I can see, is an acute form of insanity; and yet it offers an opportunity for big things. That's paradoxical, isn't it? But I expect that, out there, you soon find out what you have in you . . .'

'Probably — but I'm not going to see how I react; I'm going because it's the only decent thing to do.'

'I wonder if Mother will see it that way!'

'I wonder —— I shan't let her know anything until we're safe in camp. You'll try to smooth it over, won't you, Justine? Tell her I'll be bound to come back, and it'll soon be over, and all that sort of thing . . .'

'Sure. We'll look after her.'

'And cheer up Uncle Will — although I think he's guessed already. Good Lord! I wish I could get out of the country without seeing any one!'

'The Earls will be terrific!' Justine observed a little grimly. 'Can't you just see Aunt Win oozing with excited grief, and Valerie-Maud —— Oh, my dear, you'd better run away!'

'No,' said Bryce. 'I may possibly have to stay away too long for that.'

They turned into Longfellow Street under the thin flow of lamplight. The fragrance of spring flowers was all about them, and from the darkness far up above came the slow rustle of a thousand phantom leaves . . .

Justine ran her fingers through her hair. 'I don't like to hear you say that; somehow it sounds — funny. Well,

things are funny, aren't they? If you can't understand them, I suppose you might as well laugh at them . . .'

'Yes; I suppose so.'

'But sometimes I get mixed and laugh at the wrong things. Monsieur, for instance — once I laughed at Monsieur. That was a rotten mistake. Roger would never have made it . . .'

They passed along quietly under the high, spray-armed elms. And then: 'I'm glad you're going, Bryce — he would have been too; and I hope you come back.'

Bryce knocked his pipe again. 'So do I!' he said.

They turned down the dim, pebbled pathway fringed with daffodils. Nellie came to the front door and stood there outlined in warm yellow light. Her pink dress was soft with a mist of lace — the color of spring flowers and dawn skies.

She waved her hand to them, brightly, serenely. 'Come along, darlings — there is pineapple cream in the dining-room for you.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

NELLIE received Bryce's letter from training camp one late spring morning at breakfast. She had just finished her omelet and remarked a little plaintively upon the price of eggs, when Justine strolled in with the mail and tossed it around the table with an airy disregard for coffee and toast.

Mr. Blair came off the best, as usual. He had two slim but enthusiastic travel circulars extolling the charms of India and Egypt respectively in large type and a series of misprints; and a gentle epistle from a maiden aunt named Deborah who wrote simply and confidentially of her chickens and her garden and her pastor . . . 'I am sure, my dear William, that you will be very glad to learn that the rosebush, of which I spoke to you last year, has flowered most beautifully even though we feared for a time that it would never do so again. The plum tree also, down by the creek, and the crab-apples and lilac . . .' Everything seemed to flower most beautifully for the maiden aunt Deborah.

Mr. Blair read it all with care and made a mental note of the several inquiries concerning his health and the weather and the state of his garden; and he felt quite pleased about the recovery of the rosebush.

Joan had a belated Easter card from a little boy, sadly absent-minded, who was always under the strain of trying to catch up with life in general; and an affectionate invitation to a birthday party from a little girl who was early resorting to subtleties: 'Darling Joanie, will you come to my party on Saturday afternoon at my house? Have you seen Weenie Williams's new bracelet? Say, Joanie, darling, it's just *too* sweet with a cunning little pearl and all. She got it at Hollis's. There are going to be ten at the party and four boys. Your loving friend, Ruthie.'

Joan took a long, thoughtful draught of milk. 'I'll get her a kitten,' she decided cheerfully, 'for a surprise!'

Justine had a note from Wilhelmina, who had skipped off to New York one fine bright day to see the world and acquire a little wealth. She wrote with an easy flow of 'damns' and 'hells' and a general air of swagger. 'It's a great life, *n'est-ce pas?* — as Monsieur would say, bless the old duffer! For instance, what the devil do you think I am at the present moment? Hungry, if you please! Wouldn't the family wail with emotion if they knew! To be candid, it's a damned irritating sensation; but I'm getting more or less used to it. I exist mainly on a messy sort of stew that smells abominably and tastes exciting but unpleasant. I dare say it's made out of horses grown mellow in service to man, and stray little Fidos picked up around the street. Oh, well, one can't be too particular — as so-and-so said to so-and-so when something-or-other happened . . . I haven't much to tell you just now. New York isn't exactly lapping me up with enthusiasm; but never mind — I'll be bound to come out on top; people like me always do — we've got such confoundedly tough hides . . .'

Justine skimmed through it and helped herself to more toast. 'On the verge of a funk!' she decidedly skeptically. 'The more strutting she does, the less there is behind it.'

And Nellie, sitting tranquil and serene in a cushion-backed chair, slipped a plump finger through the envelope and opened her letter from Bryce.

2

EVERY one had something soothing to say, something kind and gentle to pad about Nellie's distress; but for a while it all flowed over her as unnoticed and impotent as the drone of bees in the garden.

She was shocked into sudden confusion — such confusion as she had known only once before in that day when Roger

had sailed out over the falls. She pushed back the truth with both hands, refusing to accept what it brought. Bryce, her Bryce, going to war! It seemed terrifying, incredible, a fact to be resisted and fought against with every atom of strength and blindness she had in her . . .

'He is only a boy!' she cried, and clung to it and said it over and over as if it were a charm that was bound to eradicate a terrible mistake. How could they send boys to war, to be wounded and killed and hurt! It was wicked, it was wicked; it was sinful — how could they send boys — *her* boy! She had borne him and reared him, she had filled all his days with love and devotion — by what right did these people demand her son? They had no claim on him, no part nor share in his life. They were wicked to think of taking him, wicked, without hearts and without justice . . .

'But some one has to go,' said Justine.

Nellie wound her fingers together. Yes, of course, some one had to go; there had to be soldiers. Wars couldn't go on without soldiers — there would be nothing to kill and be killed! There had to be men; but other men — other sons. Why hers — *hers!* Just one less wouldn't make any difference, not just one . . . It was so very simple, they would have to understand! In all that great army of thousands and thousands Bryce would never be missed — the gap he left there would be too small to notice and ever so much too small to matter. One boy wouldn't make any difference to them, not really and truly; but to her he would make all the difference in the world. It was so simple, so terribly simple — no one could help seeing it . . .

'He can't go!' said Nellie sharply. 'He can't go — something will have to stop him!' And then she began to cry, her blue eyes clouded with fear.

Mr. Blair patted her shoulder and made loud, consoling rumbles in his throat. Words came to him slowly and tor-

tuously as if from a far-off place. 'There, my dear, there . . . Belgium, you know; for the sake of Belgium . . .'

Nellie twisted her fingers together. 'Oh, it's easy for you,' she cried. 'He isn't your son — he isn't your son!'

Mr. Blair went on patting very gently, and then, after a while, he walked away . . .

Joan sat silent across the table, her chin cupped in her hands. This was a strange thing for the day to bring, a strange and important thing. Bryce was going away to war and quite suddenly everybody was changed as if a light had been turned out. War did things like this, then — it made people white and afraid and it filled them with tears on a lovely spring morning! Nothing else mattered very much after it came. The Easter card and the invitation to the party where there were going to be ten and four boys — these weren't important any more, because Bryce was going away.

She dug her chin deeper into her hands and looked over the blue bowl of apple-blossoms. Poor Aunt Nellie with her frightened eyes — and poor Father, too, Father who loved Bryce better than anything else in all the world. Father would be the most hurt because he was sort of deep and silent, an *inside* person. Aunt Nellie was an *outside* person. When the surprise was over she would get used to this — Aunt Nellie got used to everything after a while.

Joan slipped off the chair and went round to her in the warm, clear sweep of sunshine. 'He wouldn't want you to cry, Aunt Nellie; it would make him unhappy if he knew you cried.'

'Joan — Joan, why has this happened? . . .'

The tick of the clock beat regularly through the room like a sharp, far-away drum. 'It is wicked of them — wicked of them! Why do they make wars?'

'I've often wondered,' said Joan. 'They must be terribly mixed, mustn't they?'

Nellie twisted her fingers and stared blindly out of the window down a long tranquil street. 'They have no right to take my son — *they have no right!*'

'But they're taking everybody's son, Aunt Nellie — all over the world. If it was only Bryce, it wouldn't be so awful; then there would just be one.'

'But he's mine — *mine* ——!' An old cry wavering down the corridors of time.

Joan was silent a moment, standing slim and erect in the sunshine. 'No,' she corrected slowly; 'I don't think he's anybody's but his own.'

In the evening, when the house was quiet and blurred with shadows, they talked again . . .

'He doesn't have to go!' said Nellie. 'They can't really make him; he's young yet — younger than Jimmy.' She raised her white face in the dusk, and her voice came thin and dragging, worn tired with many words: 'Why did he do it — when he doesn't have to?'

Joan sat back on her heels. 'I guess he wants to, and Jimmy, and all of them — like in a fire when everybody helps to put it out. If I was a man I'd want to help.'

'But he's only a boy; what do they want with boys . . .'

'Maybe,' Joan reflected, 'maybe years don't really matter, being young or old or in-between; but just what you *think* about it. And you have to do what you think, always, in everything.'

Nellie leaned back and closed her eyes, blue eyes dulled with bewilderment; and the shadows grew slowly up about her, building, shade upon shade, the quiet shelter of night.

'In big things like wars,' Joan went on musingly, 'I guess everybody has something to do and something to give. It's everybody's world, so they all have to look after it. And when they've stopped looking after it with fighting and silliness, maybe they'll begin to do it beautifully — and

kindly — like planning a garden; and then everything will — will sort of fit, as it does in the sky, and nobody will get mixed up or hurt any more . . .' She drifted off into silence for a moment, sitting back comfortably on her heels in the darkness. And then: 'I wonder why no one ever explained things to the Kaiser when he was a little boy — that's what they ought to have done.'

Nellie's white lids lay wet and tired on her cheeks. Sleep was coming and dulling her fright into sadness; it was flowing up over her — gently — gently — a tide of forgetfulness and peace . . .

'Why aren't people taught to understand?' asked Joan. 'Why do they get so terribly mixed?' And the tick of the clock beat regularly through the room like a sharp, far-away drum.

3

SPRING moved on slowly and with infinite grace, each slightest passage planned and unfolded with harmony from the first white ripple of snowdrops into the warmth and color of June. Longfellow Street was laced with flowers and netted overhead with the green of spray-armed elms — but beyond the seas things only grew to die, and having died left nothing but a great emptiness. For spring in defeat was beauty in defeat — candles blown out in a shadowed land.

The early summer days were opened like books, written in, then closed and shelved away, holding a tale of heartbreak and irony, and signed by a world of groping men.

And gradually and inevitably from the midst of confusion Nellie built up order once more, moulding her thoughts into new form that they might accord with, and even support, this action which Bryce had taken. After a while she came to believe what Joan had said: everybody has something to do and something to give; and it became clearer and truer as she kept it close in her mind. Bryce's part was to do, and

hers to give — that must be it. And both of them held their own fear and pain. All over the world it was going on: doing, giving, then desistance and loss. A great game played with lives and hearts and governed by pitiless rules. Something or other kept it in action. Duty, perhaps, duty to country, to democracy, whatever it might be called (she hadn't worked that part out clearly yet); and because Bryce was old enough to feel this and to understand, he had to go and she had to give — both taking their parts as Roger would have wished them to.

Nellie tried not to cry when she thought of Bryce going to war — her son as a soldier, marching and fighting with his splendid young strength; but when she began to talk of him, to say little casual things, her voice crumpled up and anguish rushed over her swiftly.

'War is so horrible,' said Nellie; 'we must all help, we must all do our part — but it is so horrible!'

Every one was very kind; they padded her about with consolations and glossed up the daily news until it fairly shone with brightness.

Winnie hovered round, red and voluble with emotion and full of suggestions for the salvation of the world and the destruction of the Kaiser. She developed a new and hearty patriotism and bought a flag and hung it out of the front window. But it wasn't a very good flag, and after the first rainstorm all the stars and stripes ran into each other, giving a somewhat dreary appearance to the whole. So Winnie took it in and used it for a duster!

Justine, when at home, stated loud cheerful things with an air of utter conviction as if she were personally in touch with the guiding destinies of Europe.

And Joan listened much and talked a little — wondering — musing — and finding her own answers.

Nellie held fast to every little bit of encouragement they offered her, accepting their words as final and complete.

One had to be brave at a time like this, and bravery came easier, much easier, when everything was viewed through another's assurance.

Mr. Blair was very gentle and kindly, but silent too, like some one who feared to trust himself overmuch with words. Mr. Blair proudly approved of what Bryce had done — and wrote long, intricate letters trying to tell him so. But sometimes at night, with the room and the world outside drained to a blank silence, his pride and his approval would be suddenly lost in a wave of fear, and thoughts and desires would grow clamorous, beating themselves through his head . . .

Bryce was leaving — was going away! If only he too might get into this war, helping to save Belgium with his son. Marching, fighting, perhaps even dying with Bryce out there on a strange field. Flanders they called it — Flanders where great and terrible things were being done involving the fate of half a world . . .

Mr. Blair would be filled with sharp longing in the quietness of the night as if little doors of reserve had been opened letting out secrets and dreams. How wonderful to be with Bryce in this vast struggle for the world — this struggle to preserve and protect the fruits of civilization! How wonderful to be there at his side, helping him if he faltered, saving him, taking his bullet or bayonet thrust — proving his love as he had never been able to do before! Life could hold nothing more splendid than this; not even the East with its heritage of wonder and glory — not even a thousand Orients with a thousand treasures to offer. This — this would give all existence a purpose and a fruition . . . But out there on the strange fields Bryce would march far ahead of him, Bryce would run swift and unafraid, where he might only — stumble. How splendid to go on through this war side by side — fighting and winning together!

In the quietness of the night Mr. Blair would be filled with a crying loneliness because he couldn't — he couldn't ——

4

EVERY now and again Joan ran away; not often, but just when the spirit of wandering and adventure flared up within her most urgently. She always wrote a note before leaving, explanatory and mildly apologetic, and went promptly to bed upon returning; but in-between these two humdrum points lay a space of enchantment that no one could spoil because it was secret and separate as all real enchantment had to be.

The chief joy of running away was that anything could happen between leaving and returning — the sky was the limit for adventure and the nearest visible boundary a ripple of low hills across the eastern rim of the earth. There was no rule or plan or sensibleness about it; you left — and the rest just happened in a casual happy-go-lucky fashion never twice the same!

Joan could remember all the adventures very clearly. There was one, a long time ago, with a tribe of dirty but wonderful gypsies who let her stay for dinner with them and gave her a little pink and blue basket and a string of red beads to take home. And there was another one with a nice oldish man who had run away from his office to fish in the creek behind the pine wood. Joan sat on a log beside him and dangled her legs in the water and ate up half his lunch. And the nice man told her a great many lovely stories about elves and wood folk, making them up as he went along. And Joan laughed so much at the funny parts that she fell off the log into the creek and had to be hoisted out by the end of her petticoat and spread in the sunshine to dry. And then, to add to the general excitement, they caught a fish; not a very large one, but still — a fish! That was one of the best adventures to remember, although there were ever so many more about tramps and thunderstorms and a real hermit with a beautiful white beard who taught her the names of all the birds while they lay flat on their backs under a maple

tree with butterflies floating over them. Lovely things to remember — and remember ——

And then early one Saturday morning the spirit of wandering flared up again and Joan went marching off down the long, quiet length of Wimble Street which was the nearest and quickest escape into the country where things happened.

Her pockets bulged, as usual, with cookies and peanuts for any stray animals encountered, and her shoes were strung over her shoulder in case the random strolling of the day should lead into prickly paths. Sometimes it did; you could never tell — you could never even begin to guess, which made it all tremendously exciting.

She threw back her head and sniffed the damp morning air. It was going to be very warm later on when the sun came well up above the misty hills — the nice golden warmth, heavy with country smells. The sky above her was swept with summer wind carrying off fleet after fleet of great silver clouds over the speared tips of the pines; thin, fine-spun clouds sailing on a swift wind after the moon and the running night. And rolling away beneath them, silent and empty as if it had just been made, was the long white road leading to anywhere and anything under the sun . . .

Joan tramped along with head thrown back and arms swinging. She was full of stray bits of verse picked up casually from here and there and she chanted them over to herself in a low, marching voice while the mists lifted and the skies grew clear:

> 'Once in the wind of morning
> I ranged the thymy wold,
> And the world-wide air was azure,
> And all the brooks ran gold.'

That sounded fine to start out with — a poem made for a day like this when you were off by yourself on an empty road.

'I hope I find a brook,' thought Joan; 'I'll take off my

clothes and lie inside and watch it running gold . . .' And then, in a soft, low chant again:

'Clunton and Clunbury,
Clumgunford and Clun,
Are the quietest places
Under the sun.'

What lovely names — Clumgunford and Clun. They would be little places, of course; tranquil and shady ones with very old gardens and a lot of very old ladies with white curls and lavender silk dresses puffed out with lace. And the old ladies would talk about lovely, gentle things with long silences in between; and they would have beautiful names like Arabelle and Gwendolyn and Dorinda. And they would never even have heard that there was a terrible war going on — because they lived in old gardens full of quiet old things . . .

'I shall go to Clumgunford,' Joan decided, and she tramped along down the long road, her face set toward the misty hills rippling across the edge of the earth.

After a while the town was left behind and the farmhouse of the creamy-haired family stood out clearly in front of the wet fields. Joan crossed the yard and took a deep drink at the pump and poured a dipperful of water over her legs to see what it felt like. Then she dried herself with a handkerchief and sat down on the back steps to eat a cookie while the sky grew luminous with rose and gold before her.

'A new day,' said Joan. 'My day — everybody's day ——' She cupped her chin in her hands and watched it all with absorbed interest as if it were something that had never happened in the whole world before. Other days belonged to the past; they were finished and done with, and only the beautiful things that had happened in them need ever be remembered. But this was a new one — it might be the beginning of the earth, the beginning of everything — a new day holding adventure and enchantment!

More songs bubbled up in her thought because it was dawn and the time for singing:

> 'Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,
> Trampled to the floor it spanned,
> And the tent of night in tatters
> Straws the sky-pavilioned land.'

That was a fine one, like a bugle blowing out in the early stillness. 'Wake!' cried Joan, flinging back her head. 'Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters, trampled to the ——'

The door behind her opened with a sudden tearing creak letting out a hot wave of kitchen smells. Then there was an abrupt relapse into silence.

Joan twisted round on the step and looked up. 'Hullo,' she said affably.

The limp woman in the doorway stared at her with round blank eyes. 'Oh, you naughty little girl!' she managed at last. 'Have you gone and done it again?'

Joan nodded and went on munching with an air of complete serenity.

'Well!' exclaimed the limp woman. 'Well . . .' and appeared too utterly astonished to delve deeper into the situation.

'I'm going to Clumgunford,' said Joan. 'I just stopped here to have my breakfast — if you don't mind. I'm going ever such a long way to-day, hours and hours and hours.'

The limp woman blew her nose slowly and reflectively as if seeking inspiration in her handkerchief; and then she drifted back into the shadowy depths of the room where the stomachs of the creamy-haired family were amply and punctually attended to, while their heads went forever unfed!

After a while the old lady came outside and sat down on the steps beside Joan as if she were quite used to finding people left about when the door was opened in the morning.

'How do you do, dearie?' said the old lady in her soft, wispy voice.

'How do you do?' said Joan. 'I like watching the sky, don't you?'

The old lady looked up with faded blue eyes — up and up into miles of wind-swept sky. 'It's pretty,' she returned; 'but it hurts my eyes . . .' So she looked down again.

'Then let's watch the hills,' suggested Joan; 'maybe they'll skip with joy.'

'What, dearie?'

'The hills over there at the edge.'

They sat quietly on the back steps looking out over the wet and shining fields. And then the old lady began to talk, half to herself . . . 'The sea is beyond the hills, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Joan; 'just on the other side, I guess.'

'And over the sea is where they are fighting — funny how men are always fighting . . .' She shook her head very gently and slowly.

'Can you understand it?' asked Joan.

'What, dearie?'

'About men fighting.'

'No,' said the old lady. 'I never could — never could . . .' Her voice trailed off like an echo; and then it began again: 'Little Eddie, he's gone now — yesterday — no, not yesterday, a long time ago.'

'Who's Eddie?'

'My grandson; he's gone now — fighting like all the rest of them.'

'I know,' said Joan; 'my brother has gone too.'

'But it's not here this time — it's over the sea. You said it was over the sea, didn't you?'

'Yes — on the other side.'

'That's a long way. The other was here — my Eddie didn't have to go over a sea to be killed . . .'

'Was that another war?'

'Yes — there were so many of them; always fighting — and fighting ——' Her eyes grew dim and vacant; they were staring back into the past.

'And can you remember them all?' asked Joan.

'What, dearie?'

'The wars the poor people keep on making.'

'When you lose things,' said the old lady in a strange, hard voice, 'you remember and remember all the time!'

'And you — did you lose things?'

She folded her thin, wispy hands together and spoke slowly and emptily as if she were repeating a very old list: 'My father — my brother — and my Eddie — and now little Eddie. Always fighting — fighting . . .'

Joan looked out toward the hills, her eyes full of early sunshine. 'Oh, why do they do it?' she asked; 'why do they do it?' And then: 'What were the wars about — the other ones?'

The old lady shook her head. 'I've forgotten — such a long, long time ago. I only remember what I lost. My father — my brother — my Eddie — all lost . . .'

Joan's voice came sharp and clear. 'Why don't people see it; why don't they understand? I wish I could get on the top of the world and shout at them and shout at them until they *had* to!' She dug her chin into her hands and thought a moment. 'No — that wouldn't be any good. It's quiet things that make people understand, not shouting . . .'

'And the house was all burned,' went on the old lady, her eyes very far away; 'the new cushions with the lace — and the frilly curtains — such a nice little house that my Eddie made . . .'

'What war was that?' asked Joan.

'One of them — I can't remember; the one that happened here and took my Eddie.'

They sat silent on the back steps facing the wide sky swept with wind and color. The creamy-haired boy with the

tanned skin marched across the yard, whistling and swinging a long peeled stick.

The old lady nodded and smiled. 'Little Eddie . . .' she observed.

'But I thought he had gone to war,' said Joan.

'What, dearie?'

'I thought you said little Eddie had gone to the war.'

The old lady crinkled up her eyes thoughtfully. 'Yes, that's right — little Eddie has gone to the war. He must be one of the others; I forget their names. But he'll go when he's old enough — they all go when they're old enough!'

'But some day,' Joan declared, 'they will have to stop; people can't be fooled forever and ever, can they?' She tilted back her head and looked into the pale, clear blueness of the sky. 'I wonder what makes them keep waiting, doing the old things and the silly things over and over. Why don't they start out to be different now — to-day!'

'Fighting — and fighting ——' in a tired, wispy voice. 'And lost things and burnt things to remember . . .'

'Who was your Eddie?' asked Joan.

The old lady sat up straight and thin on the back steps facing the hills. 'My husband,' she said; 'my husband — my Eddie!' And then she suddenly leaned forward and stared at the ground — an old, old lady who had never learned to forget.

There was a sharp hissing and sputtering from the stove in the dim kitchen behind them, an inside sound intruding upon the quietness of the morning.

Joan jumped onto the ground and stood there slim and erect with her shoes strung over her shoulder. The white road was shining now; it was leading off between wet fields into a world of enchantment. Calling — and calling . . .

Joan stooped down and kissed the old lady. 'I'm going now.'

'What, dearie?'

'I'm going now — off to Clumgunford. It's a very long way, so I guess I'd better start.'

'Are you going by yourself?'

'Yes — I go most places by myself.'

'And you don't get lost?'

'No — I always come back.'

'And you're not afraid?'

'Oh, no, I'm never afraid.'

The old lady nodded and smiled. 'You're a funny little girl. Come back again some day; and remember, never let them take anything that belongs to you — it will be lost, quite lost . . .'

Joan ran swiftly across the yard and turned at the apple tree to wave. The old lady was sitting on the lowest step patting one of the white chickens with gentle hands. She was speaking to it, over and over, very quietly: 'There, Eddie — dear little Eddie . . .'

Joan watched for a moment, her eyes full of the sun, and then she raced out into the middle of the long white road. It stretched emptily and silently before her — beckoning the way to a land of adventure, to a world that held no war and no memories.

Far off beyond the pine wood and the meandering creek there was a grassy path leading across meadows into a cool and shady copse where the earth was moist and whitened with small fragrant flowers and the sky above was traced with branches and a fluttering mass of maple leaves. Joan reached it midway through the morning, strolling leisurely and chewing a blade of grass as if time and concern had been happily blotted out.

So far the day held two events. First, a worried-looking farmer had met her on the road and tried to carry her back to town. But he couldn't run very fast — he was the puffy sort — and he stubbed his toe in the heat of the chase, which

was all rather too bad for the farmer — but quite as it should be for her. And second, she had encountered a ragged gentleman with a large red nose and a beaming smile who asked her the way, the time, and the distance all in one breath; and then, without waiting for an answer, burst into quite a lengthy speech on the beauties of nature. Joan had sat down by the roadside and listened with great interest until, having apparently exhausted his subject, the gentleman picked a daisy, sniffed it loudly and appreciatively, and ambled down the road . . .

And now she had reached a shady copse full of coolness and white flowers — just the place in which to lie out flat and watch the birds as the old hermit had taught her. 'Maybe there will be a brook,' thought Joan hopefully, and quickened her pace into a brisk trot.

And then, as the grassy path wheeled round under the maples, she ran into some one sitting calmly on a log — some one rather elderly, with spectacles and rumpled hair and a coat slung over his shoulder. . .

'Hello!' said Joan, who was never surprised at a sudden encounter.

He regarded her with some astonishment. 'Hello — and what are *you* up to?'

'I've run away,' she announced cheerfully.

He pulled the spectacles onto the tip of his nose and tried to look fearfully stern: 'Very naughty!' he declared.

'Very nice!' said Joan with equal gravity.

'Well, you seem to enjoy it.'

'Oh, I *do!*'

He nodded twice and then leaned forward with an air of great secrecy. 'So do I!' whispered the elderly gentleman.

Joan was charmed. 'Have *you* run away?'

He waved his collar and tie in one hand and his coat in the other. 'Until five minutes ago — yes. Now I'm going back again.'

'Oh!' She was obviously disappointed. 'Have you *got* to?'

He meditated a moment while a butterfly floated along and sat down on one of his ears. 'Well, you see, it's like this — if I'm too long they'll get excited.'

'You ought to leave a note — that's what I do.'

'And does it work?'

'Not very well,' she admitted. 'They used to hunt — you know, all get together and go up and down everywhere, and Justine would *hoot!* But now they wait for me at home, and when I get back Aunt Nellie cries — right straight off — and says I'm the most difficult child she ever heard of!'

'And you?'

'Oh, I go to bed.'

'How disagreeable!'

She nodded. 'That's why I'm careful not to get back too early.'

'Very sensible of you,' he commented.

'And what do they do to you?'

'Nothing very exciting; usually they ask questions.'

'So do mine!' — growing more and more confidential. 'But I never tell them anything — anything at all.' Then, gravely, after a pause: 'I think it's better not to!'

He nodded with complete understanding. 'One has to be so careful, doesn't one?'

'Yes,' said Joan, 'one *does*.' She slipped casually into the grass and picked a long green blade to chew, while the elderly gentleman on the log regarded her with great interest. 'This time,' she told him with obvious satisfaction, 'this time I'm *lost!*'

'Really!'

'Mostly I don't get far enough for that — there are so many people to call on, you know.'

'How's that?'

Joan explained to him from the heights of experience: 'If

you run away very much, you get to know an awful lot of people — all kinds and all over the place. I stay with them until they start to take me home — then I go!'

'Exactly! And do you do this very often?'

'Only when I *have* to.' She turned over and lay flat on her back with the shadows of leaves falling about her. 'I suppose,' she observed, 'you're Important!'

He flipped his tie in the air. 'Only very slightly — why?'

'I met another Important man once; he had a tremendous office — it sounded sort of awful — and he ran away to fish in the woods where no one could find him. It was his daughters, you see.'

The elderly gentleman was all attention: 'His daughters?'

'Yes — he seemed to have ever so many, and they were sort of a bother. He said that every time he turned round to do something nice, he found a daughter waiting for him with something else — not nice!'

'Dear me! what a nuisance!'

'They were bossy, I guess —— Have you got an office?'

'After a fashion. But where are you bound for to-day?'

'Clumgunford!' said Joan promptly.

'Clum — Clum — is it a circus?'

'Oh, no; it's a little place with lots of old gardens and quiet old ladies and butterflies and roses and things . . .'

'It sounds very nice; and do you know the way?'

'Not quite — but that is all the more exciting. I may walk right into it any moment; it may be just on the other side of the copse — you didn't happen to notice it, did you?'

'No, I don't believe I did. But I was thinking so hard that perhaps I looked right through it.'

Joan nodded. 'That often happens, doesn't it?'

'What . . .'

'Thinking so hard that we look right through things.'

'Yes — it's a careless habit,' said the elderly gentleman. Then he got off the log and stretched himself. 'I tell you

what we'll do! You go through the copse and have a visit with the old ladies in Clum — whatever it is, and I'll wait for you here. Then we'll go back together.'

'Are *you* lost?' Joan demanded.

'More or less, I believe.'

She jiggled her legs excitedly in the grass. 'You know, there *is* a way of going home where you take every road on the right — it's lovely, you never know where you are!'

'Well, we'll see about that . . .'

Late in the afternoon a little girl with her shoes strung over her shoulder, and an elderly gentleman (who had donned his collar, tie, and coat, and a misleading air of dignity and gravity) walked hand in hand down Longfellow Street.

Winnie was the first to see them. She came rushing across the lawn in a great flutter of excitement and astonishment. 'Why, Jo-un! Jo-un! Wherever have you been!'

'That's my Aunt Winnie,' Joan explained; 'she loves asking questions!'

The elderly gentleman dropped his voice to a confidential whisper: 'We people who run away,' he said, 'must stand together. You say nothing, and I won't!'

She nodded in agreement.

Winnie swooped down upon them. 'Oh, Mr. Jarvis, how sweet of you to bring her back — you *naughty* little girl, Joan! I'm Mrs. Earl — so very, very kind . . .'

The elderly gentleman bowed slightly. 'We were coming the same way,' he said, which was both true and discreet. 'It was a pleasure.' And then he gave another bow, a different one, for Joan's private self, and walked briskly away into the haze of mellow sunshine . . .

Winnie swept round and confronted the small figure in the path. '*Well!*' The word was so inflated with feeling that it seemed to pop like a balloon and fall all about them in little

fragments of sound. 'How on earth,' she demanded, 'how on earth did you meet the Mayor?'

Joan gazed up at her blandly. 'I'm very hungry,' she said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

Longfellow Street, after a brief period of awed astonishment before so tumultuous an event as War, was jerked into enthusiasm and double-time activity with the rest of Aldington.

Mr. Blair worked three evenings a week at the office ('Without anything extra, dear, you know!' Nellie always explained, with a nice regard for his nobility); and spent three more in the vegetable garden behind the lilac bushes, where he sprayed and fiddled most of the fruits of his labor to a limp and untimely end. Mr. Blair could never quite get over the feeling that Nature needed a great deal of assistance from the superior ability and judgment of man . . .

Next door Hector was also fathering a garden into being. Winnie had suggested it to him in one of her brighter moments when she was suffused with a mighty desire to do something vital; and it had all proceeded to flourish most beautifully and abundantly despite Hector's earnest attentions and an unfortunate tendency to pull up plants and carefully water the weeds!

Hector found a certain solace these days in the company of tomatoes and lettuce and radishes, having recently been denied the privilege of more active service on the grounds of flat feet. Nobody knew about the flat feet — they were a sad and bitter secret locked away in Hector's heart. He took a morbid, almost impersonal, interest in their flatness, observing their appearance in action and repose, comparing them, point by point, with other feet — Winnie's and Valerie-Maud's and the newspaper boy's. And in the evenings he roamed about the garden squashing bugs with the melancholy satisfaction of one who knew that — had this

and that been just a trifle different — he might have been squashing Germans with equal efficacy!

As soon as it occurred to them both, Nellie and Winnie joined the Ladies' War Committee of the Wimble Street Presbyterian Church. They attended every meeting with clocklike regularity, and knit large bumpy socks, with a book of directions on their knees, and agreed passionately with all the brave and lofty things uttered within earshot . . .

Every now and again one of the ladies would drop quietly out from the committee activities and reappear later on, very white and silent, as if she had gone a long way down a dark road and seen nothing but waste and pain.

Everybody would move about her kindly, trying to blur her grief, and sometimes she would notice and be grateful, and sometimes she would only sit knitting — for the others that were left.

Only one of them had ever brought fierceness back into the meeting with her. She was young Mrs. Freddie Button, who stayed away half a week and returned abruptly with a cold, hard face and blue eyes that had been drained of their youth and their laughter. She stood in the doorway a moment and stared at them all, hands in pockets and her head held stiffly back. And then she began to speak in a strange bitter voice that had never belonged to her before . . . 'I've come to tell you that I'm through with this — all through forever. I never want to see you again because you're helping to make it go on; that's what you're doing — sitting here doing your part for it, saying it's good and fine to go, telling other people to give themselves up to it. You're killers, every one of you, because you're helping to make it go on! Killers — do you hear! But I'm through with you! I'm going to fight it with every breath in my body and for every day that I live. You can knit your socks and make your speeches telling people to go out there and be brave and

splendid and obedient. I'll make mine too — I'll tell them the truth — I'll tell them they're going to be murdered, to have knives in them and bullets. I'll yell my speeches at them! I'll make them hear the truth! And you can sit here helping it, knitting your socks and talking your soft lies. But I'm through — do you hear! — through — through —— I know things now, I've learned — oh, my God, what I've learned! . . .' She stood there for a moment staring at them with those hard blue eyes, and then she turned abruptly and went away — and never came back — young Mrs. Freddie Button!

But there was only one of that kind, and the Committee went steadily through summer and fall like the war itself across the seas.

And then one afternoon Nellie made a speech. It was just after she had received Bryce's first letter from France, and she was feeling a little bit queer inside and tremulously eloquent on the subject of fortitude. The speech was brief, but very earnest, and a slant of yellow sunshine from the Sunday-School window swept over Nellie as she stood on the platform — a trim, compact little figure with steadfast blue eyes and carefully waved hair.

Her voice came high and clear and a trifle shaky because it was a big meeting and Bryce was in France now — terribly far away. 'While our dear boys are over there, while they are fighting for democracy and being so fine and brave and strong, we must do our part — we too must be fine and brave and strong. If we will all work together and not — and not complain, then we will help them to win. We must not fail our dear boys; we must all do our part . . .'

And Winnie wept and clapped enthusiastically until every one else had left off, and the ladies were so touched by the speech that they promptly elected Nellie chairman of a new sub-committee that had just formed!

'I suppose,' Justine observed, 'it's because you look so

deceptively competent, dearest. You'll probably never be able to live up to the impression you've created!'

But Nellie quite beautifully rose to the occasion. She appointed Winnie her personal assistant (which was an act of sentiment rather than wisdom), and embarked upon a round of duties with an air of lofty and determined efficiency. She collected money for various beneficent purposes, called on other less inspired ladies, entreating them to do their part, and addressed meetings with unsuspected bravery, a flag in one hand and her white kid gloves in the other.

When it came to the addresses, Mr. Blair was of invaluable assistance. He took Nellie's fervent, but apt-to-be-muddled, ideas and moulded them into a simple and direct form. Sometimes it seemed a little odd to him that he should be able to do this — he who was usually so foiled when he tried to express himself. But when dealing with anything that pertained to the war Mr. Blair became suddenly articulate as if a secret spring had been touched. While he went over Nellie's carefully written speeches in his room alone, polishing and pruning and inserting, deep and rather lovely things came to the surface of his thought — words that were right for once and said what he wanted them to . . .

Nellie was very grateful for his interest and assistance; and whenever the ladies complimented her she always made a point of saying: 'I am not an orator, dear, I don't pretend to be that — I only speak straight from my heart.'

And Winnie considered that very brave and beautiful, what with Bryce and all. 'If I were you, darling, I should die of fright!' she remarked constantly and admiringly. 'I don't see how you do it, Nellie — really, I don't . . .'

But Nellie had her fright all smothered over now. Its sharpness was blunted by work and a carefully contrived vagueness regarding the state of the world. In her thinking the war had become something almost abstract — something great and powerful and excessively shocking for which one

knit socks and collected money and made speeches; a vast upheaval in which everybody played a part. Her thoughts of Bryce all progressed down a narrow and familiar rut: He was a brave American soldier who had answered his country's call, who was fighting for democracy and winning, for the safety and happiness of the world!

Nellie liked to picture him erect on horseback, riding across a tidy French battle-field and waving a sword for democracy. And resting afterwards — she especially liked to fancy Bryce resting in a pretty little village with plenty of fresh vegetables to eat.

She rarely considered the Germans or the guns; they were things outside of the picture, too terrible and too fearful to think about. They were blocked into obscurity — a vague enemy being vaguely overcome . . .

'It won't last much longer,' she repeated resolutely; 'it will soon be over, and he will soon be back.' It helped her to say things like that; it muffled more closely the sharpness of her fear.

Justine was mildly interested in the committee activities and, in a moment of leisure, attended one of the meetings, where she greatly offended the ladies by cheering at the wrong place. After that she lapsed into a benevolent sort of attitude and mimicked the president expertly for the benefit of the studio.

Nellie was very distressed at her lack of a sense of duty in this time of great need. 'But, pet, you must do something, every one is, every one has to. Knitting, for instance . . .'

But Justine refused point-blank to knit. 'It would drive me stark mad!' she declared with feeling. 'After the first sock or two I should probably fall upon my needle like a Roman soldier and perish miserably!'

And so that was the end of the knitting.

'I can't understand you,' said Nellie from the lofty heights of patriotism. 'I simply can't understand you . . .' And

then she felt that perhaps that wasn't an exactly wise or appropriate thing for a mother to say. So she decided very firmly: 'It is selfish, Justine; I am sorry to have to tell you, but it is selfish.'

2

It was in November that Justine received Wilhelmina's letter from overseas. As far as could be gathered from the brief and hasty scrawl, she was in France, doing some sort of canteen work, and was glowingly elated at her own deftness in getting into it . . .

'I thought I might as well be blown up nicely and thoroughly with a bomb as wilt away in New York with nothing to brighten the end but an unsullied love for Art. So here I am — and never so damned stimulated in all my days! Take my word for it, there's nothing like a little old war for jerking you out of the monotony of life . . .'

Justine read it and narrowed her green eyes thoughtfully. 'Just like Hell,' she observed. 'She'd wring a personal benefit from any disaster under the sun!'

'I think it's terrible,' said Nellie, 'for a young girl to be over there alone like that.'

'Oh, shocking, of course! I can't imagine why Hell didn't provide herself with a chaperon. But she *is* doing her part!'

Nellie frowned. She felt that delicacy and discretion should be exercised in doing one's part.

Justine wrote a rambling letter in return, sprawled out before the fire while Nellie plotted a new speech and Joan did sums in a stealthy whisper.

'I suppose you're rushing round and painting the ruins while they're fresh — you're such an enterprising sort of person! As for me, I'm thinking of descending to the depths of commercial work, although Monsieur would go all to pieces with the shame of it. He does so want me to do something noble — another fat madonna, I suppose, or James

patting Matthew on the back. Well, who knows! I may be seized with a lofty inspiration one of these days and beat the old fellows at their own game! But I doubt it, my dear, I seriously doubt it, for I ain't that kind of a gal! Just at present advertisements appeal to me. They look simple enough, the Lord knows — fluffy blonde damsels eating grapenuts with expressions of ecstasy, and sleek young men gamboling about in B.V.D.'s and announcing triumphantly: "Hooray for us — we don't shrink!" It would be rather exhilarating, don't you think so?

'On the side, I'm doing a few posters for a sort of pep meeting that Mother attends every week. It is made up of ladies who are taking the war as earnestly and enthusiastically as if it were a drive for the Home Beautiful. They sing songs and wave flags and all that sort of thing! Mother's one of their shining lights. She's blossomed out into a lecturer among other things, and, ye gods! you ought to hear her when she's out on the rampage! "Fellow Mothers!" she thunders, "we must be brave, we must do our part!" And then she waves a flag and everybody applauds violently and begins to weep — especially Aunt Win. Mother adores it; she gets so excited that she mixes up all her facts and her tenses and nearly falls off the platform. It's really immense! And after she's through, all the fellow mothers flock about her in a tearful mob and some of them talk — Lord! how they *do* talk, especially (again) good old Aunt Win. It's the quiet ones in black that make you feel rather queer. I wish to Heaven more of them would be quiet — it cheapens a thing so when it's mauled over and over with words.

'They haven't got such a bad idea in the Committee, but in its present state it's a little hard to tell where the sense leaves off and the sentimentality begins. I expect their president has something to do with it. She's a thin lady with a pale moustache, and she calls the meetings to order with a silly little hammer and wears half a dozen badges and but-

tons to show how important she is. They are mortally afraid of her, poor dears, because her husband's headed for mayor. Personally I think he should be eliminated on the grounds of the moustache. It isn't fair for a city to be saddled with a thing like that. And, besides, the lady expresses herself in a sort of squawk followed by a heavy wheeze. After you've listened to it for ten minutes, you're ready to get up and fight anything!

'And the secretary of the outfit is quite precious — she reads the minutes as if she were reciting "Paradise Lost" and takes notes with the languid and pensive air of one who composes a sonnet while the rabble rave without. The treasurer is rather decent, although she has white eyelashes which I can't help abominating. The vice-presidents are an earnest and somewhat careworn lot, ranging from a hefty blonde who is slow but beautifully honest, to a pop-eyed lady who once met a countess and has never got over it. Such, then, is the circle in which Mother now lives and moves and has her being . . .'

It was a long and expansive letter for Justine. She sent it off the next day addressed in heavy purple ink and with half a dozen stamps wiped across the top. And that was the end of Wilhelmina until the following May, when another note arrived bearing a London postscript.

Justine skimmed through it quickly and then slumped back in her chair. 'My God!' she announced inelegantly. 'The poor fool's gone and got married!'

3

WHEN the armistice was signed, the Ladies' War Committee promptly reorganized itself into the Ladies' Peace Committee, and began to serve light refreshments at the close of the meetings.

Nellie attended for several weeks because it had become a firm and fixed habit, like going to church, but gradually her

interest dwindled, and other things — old things that had been laid aside for a long time — grew to importance once more. It all came about quite easily and naturally, a mere click back into place after a period of turmoil and confusion and fear. While the demand for service remained she had done her part, even as Bryce had done his. She had put other affairs aside — she had been willing to lose herself in a group and a cause.

But now the war was over and the great driving force had suddenly been removed. There was nothing left to stimulate activity, no stirring call to respond to with a round of speeches and meetings. Peace was simply a normal state to which they had returned after a long and tragic interruption. One accepted it and was very grateful.

'We must not brood,' said Nellie; 'the war belongs to the past; it is all over and done with now. It is our duty, dear, not to brood.' She was prepared both to forgive and forget. She was even prepared to forgive the Kaiser if he would settle down quietly and behave himself. Winnie considered that very magnanimous and remarkable. Winnie was all for giving the Kaiser a thorough good drubbing. '*And* little Willie,' she would add with strict disapproval. 'He has such a *funny* face!'

But Nellie was willing to let bygones be bygones. For after all, people who did wicked things were always properly punished some time or other. The Bible mentioned that in a number of places; it was a commandment or a beatitude or something . . . Nellie felt quite comfortable about the Kaiser, poor man!

After the first great rush of relief she began to make plans — plans for Bryce who had fought for democracy and won. Little tremors of excitement and happiness passed over her every time she thought of him. He had been away so long — and so far — 'But I knew he would be all right,' said Nellie; 'I knew he would have to come back to me.'

She felt terribly sorry for the other mothers who had nobody coming back. It filled her with sadness and distress to think of them — so she tried not to very often. 'For, after all,' said Nellie in her high, earnest voice, 'it is horrible and dreadful — I can't even bear to think of it — but some one really must be killed in a war!'

4

It was well into the next year when Bryce returned from France. No one knew of his coming until he walked into the house on Longfellow Street one flowery spring evening, quietly and casually, as if he were merely returning from a stroll in the woods.

Joan, coming down through the shadowy hall, was the first to see him. She stood quite still for a moment, the butterfly sleeves of her blue kimono trailing out on the draught from the open door. Her face was pale in the dimness, with shining eyes. 'Bryce! — Bryce! —'

He turned round. 'Why, hello, baby — I didn't hear you coming.'

'Oh,' thought Joan swiftly; 'his voice is tired; it hasn't laughed for a long time . . .'

They stood looking at one another, and smiling, while a gap of strangeness between them was slowly bridged over.

'I can't quite believe it,' said Joan; 'but you *are* here, aren't you?'

Bryce bent down and kissed her, ruffling his fingers through her hair in an old, familiar way. 'That feels like it, doesn't it? But where is Mother, Joanie — and the others?'

'In the garden at the back, I think — let's go out quickly and find them.' She caught up the blowing tails of her blue kimono and held out her hand for his.

Bryce took it and held it very tightly while they walked down the shadowed hall . . .

Outside in the garden it was still half-light with a wavering stream of color across the western sky. They paused for a moment by the door and looked about in silence. Justine, whistling and lugging a hose over her shoulder, rounded the corner of the house and stopped abruptly in the middle of the path, her eyes widening with astonishment.

'Hello,' said Bryce in a rather strained voice; 'I'm back again, you see . . .'

Justine slammed the hose on the ground and rushed up the path. 'Say!' she exploded enthusiastically, 'isn't this fine! Lord, but I'm glad to see you again — I *am* glad! Why in the devil didn't you let us know?'

'And have a mob at the station? No, thanks!'

They stared at one another a little curiously. 'Well, I am glad,' Justine repeated. 'I am glad . . .' And then she was silent again because something rather strange and awkward seemed to have grown up between them.

Joan slipped her hand out of Bryce's. 'Here comes Aunt Nellie,' she whispered. 'I'll go and get Father — he's just over there, behind the lilac bushes . . .' And as she ran swiftly down the white path, Nellie came up across the lawn her arms full of golden daffodils and her dress a cloudy pink in the half-light of the evening.

Bryce walked out to meet her, very tall and straight under the old elms.

Justine waved her arm. 'Look!' she called; 'look who's coming!'

Nellie peered through the dimness, the daffodils held closely to her breast. 'Who is it, dear . . .' And then she stopped short with a jerk and the flowers fell about her in a yellow pool. 'Bryce!' said Nellie sharply. 'Bryce . . .' And suddenly her long, careful calmness was broken and she began to cry — stumbling toward him across the lawn.

Bryce held her there under the shadow of the old elms,

patting her round, plump shoulder, pressing his cheek against the smoothness of her hair. 'It's all right,' he said over and over; 'there, Mother, it's all right . . .'

Nellie clung to him, shaken and crying beyond control as if all the fear and terror she had tried to stave off had rushed over her suddenly in a wave. 'Bryce! — Bryce!' — her small, soft hands gripped his arm; 'you might have been killed, Bryce — you might have been killed while you were away from me. How terrible . . . how terrible!'

'There, Mother, there; it's all right now; it's all over and all right . . .'

'But you might have been killed, like Max — *you*, my boy! Oh, I could never have borne it! I could never, never have borne it, darling!'

'But I'm here now; it's all right, Mother — don't you see it's all right?'

She lay against him crying softly. 'I could never have borne it, Bryce; it would have killed me too . . .'

'But it didn't happen — I'm quite safe now.'

'Yes — yes — quite safe now.'

They stood there under the tall dim trees, and after a while Nellie grew calm again and her fingers loosened their tight grip. Peace and happiness were flowing back — an old, old peace and happiness that she had lost for a long time and had tried so carefully not to miss. Everything about them had become kind and beautiful once more — the garden and the sky and the blue dusk. They were back in a world of safety now where there was no room for fear and pain . . . Nellie looked up and smiled a little tremulously. 'I didn't cry when you were gone, darling; I tried to be brave — I tried very hard all the time.'

'Of course,' said Bryce. 'Of course . . .'

And then they both noticed Mr. Blair. He was standing quietly at the edge of the path with Joan beside him. And

Mr. Blair was shining, his mild, doggy eyes were shining, everything about him was shining. It was as if Mr. Blair had been filled with a great light!

Bryce came over across the lawn and held out his hand. 'It's good to be home — Father,' he said simply.

(And Justine half-winced as if something she loved had been put aside.)

Mr. Blair held Bryce's hand in both of his and looked up with those shining eyes. He wanted to say something — he wanted to put some of his great and breathless joy into words for his son — he wanted to do it more than anything else in the world . . .

'It's good to be home,' Bryce repeated, and his voice was a little unsteady and a little tired. The trees and the deep silence and stillness of the garden seemed strange about him, like things belonging to the past and another self — an old, half-remembered self that had been left off somewhere a long time ago. He wanted to be alone for a while, to get used to it all, to break through the strangeness of these familiar things — and these closely familiar people . . .

Mr. Blair licked his lips and tried to speak. Inside he was struggling with his old shyness, his awful clamping inarticulateness. Oh, to say something, to break through this cold reserve and reach Bryce with words! His eyes grew almost pitiful in their eagerness. 'So glad — so glad . . .' said Mr. Blair in a broken, stumbling voice.

Nellie wiped her face carefully with a little lace handkerchief, and then she suddenly thought of Winnie. Why, of course! Winnie wasn't here — Winnie didn't know! 'Joan,' she called; 'Joan, run over and get Aunt Winnie, dear — run ever so quickly!'

Joan rushed across the lawn at top speed, the ends of her blue kimono flying out like wings.

'Perhaps,' suggested Mr. Blair a trifle gruffly, 'perhaps, for the present, Bryce would prefer not seeing any one.'

'But, dear, it's *Winnie* — we must let Winnie know, mustn't we, Bryce?'

'Yes — I suppose we must.'

'She'll be *so* happy, darling, and so relieved for my sake . . .'

'She'll be all out of control for at least an hour,' observed Justine cheerfully from the doorway. 'If it came to a matter of choice, I'd rather face a whole battalion of Huns than the Earl family when it is thoroughly aroused!'

'Justine!' reproved Nellie in an undertone as if they were on their best behavior before company.

Bryce laughed. 'Well, that sounds familiar enough! I rather wondered if you'd grown sweet and polite with the years — but apparently not!'

'Good Lord, no; what a morbid idea!' She held open the door with one arm and flourished the other. 'Come on, everybody — let's get into the parlor and arrange ourselves gracefully for a proper reception. Damn! There go a couple of flies. Hey, you! shush, shush!'

Nellie took Bryce's arm and walked down the hallway with little lilting steps. She was full, quite full, of happiness. Already the war and Bryce's part in it seemed hazy and far away; soon it would be nothing but the dimmest of memories, no more important than a score of others. 'Oh, I'm so happy!' said Nellie; 'so happy, darling . . .'

Mr. Blair followed behind carrying her scarf and her garden gloves; and all the things, all the beautiful, illusive things, that Mr. Blair's fumbling tongue had sought to speak, his eyes were saying now.

They had barely reached the living-room when Joan returned followed by the Earl family with Winnie in the lead. They swept jubilantly through the doorway, bursting with astonishment and chatter . . .

'My, my, my!' rattled off Winnie at a fine speed. She hugged Bryce energetically until they were both out of

breath and considerably warmed up. 'Well, I declare! I was never so excited in my life — and not a scratch, not a single scratch! Isn't that wonderful, though? I don't see how you ever did it . . .'

'Glad to see you,' said Hector, diving firmly into the circle. Hector was feeling very much impressed with the importance of the occasion. 'Beautiful weather,' he observed; 'nice and warm.'

'My gracious goodness!' shrilled Valerie-Maud; 'I was just *petrified* in case you'd be shot! Wouldn't it be terrible, Bryce, to be shot? Say, Bryce, wouldn't it be terrible ——'

'Oh, dry up, Val,' requested Justine from the side-lines. 'Give the man a little air!'

'Not a scratch!' repeated Winnie triumphantly, patting Bryce up and down with a great deal of gusto as if to prove that he was intact. And so many of them killed too! I declare, I think it's wonderful — don't you think it's wonderful, Hector?'

'Yes,' said Hector, 'I think it's very wonderful.' And then he retired to a chair and sat down and watched a little morosely and a little wistfully. 'If only they hadn't been flat . . .' ruminated Hector. And he stopped halfway in the thought and sighed deeply.

Winnie swept round and embraced Nellie with unabated fervor. 'Oh, darling, you must be so proud of him, what with his getting through without a scratch and all. You *must* be proud!'

'We all are,' said Mr. Blair.

'Let's sit down,' suggested Justine loudly. 'It's so much easier to be calm and coherent on a chair.'

Winnie flopped into a rocker and began to push herself back and forth at a great speed. 'Well, now . . .' she beamed, her whole attitude bright and expectant.

'Here's a nice, soft cushion,' said Nellie. 'You must be so

tired, dear, after all that dreadful fighting.' She spoke as if Bryce had come straight from the field of battle.

'Say!' broke in Valerie-Maud, who could remain beautifully single-minded in the greatest excitement; 'wasn't it marvelous not even to be wounded! Mr. Saunders had both of his legs taken off — didn't he, Mamma?' (As if feeling that so singular a catastrophe demanded confirmation.) 'And Julie's brother — say, Bryce, did you hear about Julie's brother? His whole ear, mind ——'

Justine interrupted her loudly and crisply: 'Where in the devil are those chocolates? Oh, here they are! Have one Bryce, or a couple if you're in the mood.'

'Thanks — any hard ones?'

'I'm not sure; you might mash your thumb into 'em and see.'

'It must have been simply ghastly,' Winnie declared. 'I don't see how people stand wars, really and truly I don't!'

'We all do our part,' said Nellie serenely, 'and then it is bound to come out right in the end.'

'Yes, I know, darling — but such terrible things do happen! Like with poor, dear Max. My, my! Wasn't it sad about Max, Bryce? And you were right there, too, weren't you? Just think of that! It must be terrible to be *right there!*'

'We have a new canary,' said Joan. 'And guess what his name is, Bryce.'

'I'm afraid I'm not much good at guessing, Joanie.'

'Well, then, it's Buttercup. Don't you think that is a nice name?'

'Very — and does he sing?'

'Oh, yes, just streams and streams . . .'

'In a sort of high soprano,' added Justine. 'He's very winsome and given to much splashing in his bath — you can hear him all over the house.'

'I just don't see how people can live through it!' declared

Winnie with great emphasis and animation, 'what with killing one another and all. I suppose you killed a lot of men, didn't you, Bryce? — you were there such a nice long time . . .'

'Dear,' murmured Nellie a little uneasily. 'He wants to forget, you know; we mustn't remind him . . .' Nellie didn't like to think of Bryce killing men.

Mrs. Earl looked a trifle crestfallen.

'I trust that the return voyage was a pleasant one,' said Mr. Blair firmly. He had been planning the words for quite a time, arranging them, getting them ready to say to Bryce . . .

'And did you see any icebergs?' demanded Valerie-Maud.

'It's too warm for icebergs, pet,' said Winnie agreeably.

'Sea rough?' queried Hector.

'Oh, nothing much to speak of — a couple of fairly mild storms.'

Winnie shivered. 'Storms at sea always sound so terrible, don't they! I know I'd be petrified, especially when they blow that big — big — what do you call that big thing they blow, Hector?'

'Fog-horn.'

'No, dear, not the fog-horn — the other big thing they blow?'

'It *is* the fog-horn,' said Bryce.

'Oh, is it? Well, then, if they blew that big fog-horn I'd be simply petrified, I know I would. I'm not a bit brave like you, Nellie.'

'Oh, I'm not very brave, dear' — gentle but not too insistent.

'Yes, indeed, you are — and I don't see how you do it, really and truly I don't. Now if *you* were on a ship ——'

'With a fog-horn!' inserted Justine.

'— and a great storm came up, why, you'd be just wonderful, Nellie, wouldn't you?'

'I don't know, dear. But they say that ships are really quite safe nowadays; they do things to them, I expect, to keep them up . . .'

'But you can never tell what will happen, darling. You're never *sure*. Look at the poor Lusitania — hundreds and hundreds of them drowned! My! wasn't that dreadful, though! Remember all about the Lusitania, Bryce . . .'

'Another chocolate?' asked Justine loudly.

'That was the time Kitchener was drowned, wasn't it, Hector?'

'No,' said Hector.

'Oh, yes, it was, dear! Don't you remember, the boat blew up and they couldn't find him anywhere. Such a wicked shame!'

'It was another time altogether,' stated Bryce shortly.

'Oh, *was* it, dear? Well, anyway, they could never find him, remember? That always seemed sort of suspicious to me. They *ought* to have found him, don't you think so?'

'Say,' broke in Valerie-Maud with carefully assumed nonchalance, 'are the French girls pretty, Bryce? I mean as pretty as us — as Americans?'

'They're different, pet,' explained Winnie confidentially; 'they're dark and rather fast. Didn't you think they were rather fast, Bryce?'

Justine stood up and stretched herself. 'If I were Bryce,' she remarked casually, 'I'd be too damned tired to think anything.'

Winnie was promptly smitten with sympathy and remorse. 'Why, of course! You must be terribly tired, Bryce, what with the journey and all. And here we are sitting and keeping you from going to bed. I declare, it's a shame — but I get so excited that I just can't remember a thing. I'm like that, aren't I, Nellie — I get *so* excited!'

'Oh, but he wanted to see you,' said Nellie; 'he wanted you to know right away, dear.'

'Oh, my, yes,' Justine affirmed laconically; 'he simply couldn't wait!'

Hector arose and shook hands with every one, including Valerie-Maud. 'Good-night,' he said. 'Fine weather we're having — nice and warm.' Hector always began and concluded with the weather.

'Oh!' exclaimed Valerie-Maud ardently, 'I'm so glad you weren't killed, Bryce — say, but I am glad ——' She showed signs of gathering force and volubility.

So, 'Come along!' ordered Winnie with an air of great briskness. 'We mustn't keep him another minute, not a minute. He'll want to go right straight to bed, what with that long journey and all. And to-morrow we can have a really good visit, can't we, Bryce? — and talk everything over. I think it's so interesting to hear all about wars and battles and things from somebody who's been right there, don't you, Hector? And I guess you have lots of souvenirs, haven't you? — I love looking at souvenirs. Remember Mrs. Saunders's, Nellie? My, my! such beauties! Well, now, come along, we mustn't keep him another moment. You go right off to bed, Bryce, dear, and have a good long sleep. There's nothing like a sleep when you're tired, nothing! Well, good-night everybody — good-night, darling — you *must* be proud!'

They trooped down the hall at last and disappeared under the shadow of the old elms.

'Thank God!' breathed Justine. 'You weathered it valiantly, old dear. Personally, I ground my teeth and broke out into what the vulgar call a sweat!'

Bryce leaned back on the couch, looking about the old room with new eyes . . .

'You'd better clear off to-morrow,' Justine advised. 'They'll be thinking up new questions all night — once they start they can't stop, poor souls . . .'

'I know a lovely place to run away to,' said Joan. 'And

no one can find you there either — they've never found me.'

Nellie hurried back into the room with little lilting steps. She was beginning to feel efficient again as well as happy and excited. 'That's right, darling; make yourself nice and comfortable — we'll have your bed ready in no time at all. You come and help me, Justine; and Joan — Joan — oh, there you are. Towels from the closet, dear — two big ones and a small one. We won't be long, Bryce; just rest there comfortably . . . ' She fluttered down the hall and up the stairs holding the frilly skirt of her pink dress in both hands.

Mr. Blair rocked back and forth on his toes, alone with Bryce in the room, with everything to say — and no means by which to say it . . . 'Perhaps,' he suggested suddenly, 'you would like a cup of coffee.' Such silly little words . . . He wondered if something of that which was in his heart would glow through them, round them, and fill them out with meaning.

'Thanks,' said Bryce; 'I rather believe I would.'

Mr. Blair still stood there, quiet and shining with his great happiness. And then, 'Very well,' he said; 'I shall be most pleased to prepare it for you.'

Nellie came downstairs again after a few minutes, a little breathless from haste. 'There, darling; it didn't take me very long, did it? And everything is quite ready for you now . . .'

The room was dim and silent in the shallow half-glow of the lamp.

'Bryce,' called Nellie softly. She tiptoed over to the couch, holding up her frilly pink skirt. Bryce was lying there, one arm thrown carelessly back and his eyes closed and shadowed. He looked very young — more like the Bryce who had left than the Bryce who had come back. Not at all soldierly or brave or hardened; but only a boy — very tired . . .

Nellie knelt down beside him, her face grown suddenly

quiet and infinitely gentle. 'Are you asleep, dear — asleep ——' She brushed back his hair with caressing fingers — dark hair, just as Roger's had been dark.

The name set something stirring far, deep inside of her. She hoped that Roger was looking on from somewhere, was seeing his son and being glad and proud with her. Perhaps he was smiling — that odd, crooked smile of his . . . Nellie almost felt as if she could speak to Roger, say something very softly to him while she knelt beside Bryce. 'He is home now — he is back with me; you know — you understand . . .'

Lilacs were blooming across the garden, fragrant and cool in the darkness of the night. The slow wind through the door was sweet with them . . . it was a channel for the breath of shadowy flowers that never forgot to come . . .

Peace seemed to hover about the room like great wings, shutting away the world and the future, shutting away everything but two people — and a third who lived in memory. 'Dear . . .' murmured Nellie, and then she was silent under the half-glow of the lamp, her face very quiet and infinitely gentle.

A thin stream of fragrance flowed up the hall — coffee from the kitchen meeting the lilacs' breath . . .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I

By autumn Justine had decided to go to New York.

'Oh, no!' said Nellie; 'that is quite impossible, dear!'

But Justine, with a casual and bland unconcern, went right ahead with her arrangements as if she were backed by the full weight of family approval. 'Of course,' she remarked (not so much as a reason as a conclusion), 'it's the only sensible and possible thing for me to do. I know, and Monsieur knows — bless his heart! — that I'm not a great artist or anything of that sort. But I can draw rather decently and I have plenty of originality and unlimited confidence. After a while I shall probably make a lot of money — thus graduating definitely from the ranks of the artistic into the ranks of the commercial! I shall probably be more in my element there, anyhow — people with excessively high aspirations always make me feel uncomfortable. I'll take the same course Hell is taking — I've found out all about it — and after that I'll begin to pay back what I owe Uncle Will.'

Nellie was quite astonished. 'But, Justine, you don't owe him anything; what a strange idea!'

'Oh, yes, I do!' Justine declared. 'Quite an impressive number of hundreds, I expect. He isn't my father — he isn't anything to do with me — and I don't sponge on outsiders for my needs. I've been borrowing ever since I started in at the studio, and I'll have to borrow some more to get me through the next stage of the game. But he'll have it all back some time — every cent of it.'

Nellie was very upset. She had never heard of such a thing in all her life!

While September was mellowing into gold and russet, and twilight was beginning to slip slowly down the hours, a letter

came from Wilhelmina containing, among other things, an invitation for Justine:

'Why don't you come and bunk with us while you're taking the course? We've got a back room you could have — nothing special about it except the wall-paper which must have been designed in a moment of despondency. The view is vertical and intimate, with an occasional sparrow to brighten it up and a strip of sky at the top — so they say! We can both chip in on the grub — it revolves pretty much around the can-opener, anyhow — and get some ideas together in our spare time. If the worst came to the worst we might start a tea-house and serve plain food garnished with plenty of atmosphere . . . We're near the school, too, so you can save on car-fare as a thrifty soul might observe. Reggie won't mind; he's busy most of the day and evening. So come along now — be a sport and step out for yourself. I'd be damned if I'd be willing to rot away in that sleek and coddled air — clinging to Monsieur's exalted babblings when I might be snatching at something sweet, brief, and lucrative. Pat him on the back for me — but don't let him fool you, old dear! Shall expect you in a couple of weeks, say — and wreck the bank if you can't make it honestly!'

'*There!*' said Justine crisply. 'So that is settled.'

Nellie was tearful and stubborn in the face of the inevitable. 'But you can't go — you can't leave me and your home and everything to go off to a strange place like that, Justine. It wouldn't be right; it wouldn't be — natural!'

'Well, then, tell me what I'm to do with myself. You know it's useless to stick on at the studio any longer — that won't lead anywhere. So what am I to do?'

'Why, there are lots of things, dear — just ever and ever so many . . .'

'Yes — but what?'

'Well, what do other girls do, pet? They don't go running away from their homes; they find things here.'

'Exactly! They teach and go into offices and stores, and then, if it comes to a pinch, they get married.'

'Well, dear ——'

'Well, dearest, none of them appeal to me, simply don't appeal to me. If I started as a teacher, I'd end as a murderer without a doubt; in an office I'd be null and void because I'm neither competent nor obliging; a store would drive me mad — "Yes, madam, indeed, the *very* latest with a dear little silk collar and the cunningest pocket inside the skirt" — Good Lord! can you see me doing it?'

Nellie was silent a moment. And then: 'What about the other, darling?'

'What other?'

'Getting married.'

Justine narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. 'I suppose, when you were my age, that is what you considered.'

'When I was your age, dear, I was already married — with a baby.'

'My, weren't you bright!'

'No,' said Nellie; 'only natural.'

'Which implies, I suppose, that I'm not natural — how distressing!'

'Well, darling, I can't help thinking that it would be better and wiser for you to stay here with me and begin thinking a little about — about ——'

'Getting married?'

'Yes, dear.'

'In other words, you would like me to sit on the front doorstep hollering for a man!'

'Justine, you do put things so crudely.'

'I know, dearest — but then I *am* crude. For instance, I think your suggestion is maudlin, weak-kneed, and thoroughly objectionable!'

'I am sorry, Justine, that you should so misunderstand your Mother' — a little thread of hurt dignity running in the soft folds of her voice.

'Oh, not a bit of it. I fully appreciate the motive, even if I can't agree with the general principle. From out the kindness of your heart you wish to lead your daughter into the happy realm of matrimony where all is fair (question) and sweet (question) and quite, quite natural. Isn't that it?'

'I don't wish to lead, dear — only to help.'

'Hovering in the background is what they call it, don't they?'

'Every mother wants to, Justine; I do and Winnie does and — all of us.'

'So I've observed! And some of you hover and some of you help — and the world goes merrily on. Which is, I expect, just as it should be.'

Nellie lapsed into a slight plaintiveness. 'I do wish you would be serious, dear — can't you understand that this is most important?'

'What is?'

'About getting married.'

'But, good Lord! I don't want to get married.'

'Oh, Justine, dear!'

'And what does "Oh, Justine, dear," mean?'

'Why, darling, all girls want to get married; not right away, perhaps, but some time. It's only natural . . .'

'But then I'm *not* natural, don't you remember?'

'You're a girl, Justine.'

'My, what a clever observation!'

'Please be serious, dear . . .' a little pleadingly, because it was all so very important.

'But I can't be serious about it unless you want an argument on your hands.'

'Oh, no, pet; just a nice little chat . . .'

'Sorry, but it would be sure to swell into something dreadfully earnest and violent. I disagree with you in both premise and conclusion — so venture farther into the matter at your own risk!'

'What do you disagree with, Justine?'

'Your assertion that the female of the species always yearns for marriage — or domesticity. They seem pretty much the same to you, don't they?'

Nellie rested, so to speak, in an old, old shelter: 'You are very young, dear; you don't understand things yet . . .'

'Somehow that sounds familiar — I wonder where I heard it before. You shouldn't quote things so much, dearest; it's a lazy habit, and rather a pathetic one!'

Nellie gave it up with a sigh. 'I can't understand you,' she declared earnestly. 'I simply can't understand you . . .'

Justine tilted back her head and yawned. 'Perhaps,' she suggested, 'one grows simpler with age.'

Bryce rather approved of the New York plan. 'It's really time you got started on something definite, isn't it? Indecision is the most gnawing sensation under the sun — I've had it, too, so I know. Now when you settle down to work ——'

'There you go again,' interrupted Justine affably. 'You simply spurt with these fine old sentiments — the Lord only knows where you picked them up! I don't want to settle down, m'dear, I want to — settle up! And I will, too; just sit and watch me.'

'Oh, I don't doubt it; you manage to get pretty much what you want and where you want.'

'Hum! Comfortable little knack, isn't it?'

'And one, I expect, that can work two ways!'

'Possibly. I wonder how long I'll be able to stick Hell's happy home? Back room, cans, and Reggie! Quite a combination. What do you suppose he's like?'

'Judging from his taste in wives, I should say something of a fool.'

'And something of a musician, apparently. He plays in a movie show orchestra — violin. He probably comes out strong when Richard embraces Rosamund and in rain-

storms. You know the kind — full of trills and squeaks!'

'Be merciful to him, won't you, Justine?'

'Reggie — Reggie — and husband to Hell! Yes, he really deserves kindness, doesn't he?'

Mr. Blair was non-committal regarding this new development in the bosom of the family. He was silent while Nellie built up one careful objection after another, and he was silent while Justine knocked them all down with a brisk and effective swing of words. He might have had opinions concerning the matter — but no one knew of them. They were kept well inside of Mr. Blair with a number of other things . . .

'It will be all right about the money, won't it?' Justine asked. 'I'll go easy on it, and the course isn't particularly costly — it's the other kind of art that mounts up.'

Mr. Blair was silent for a moment, rocking on his toes; and then: 'You are quite sure, Justine, that you wouldn't prefer going on with the — other kind?'

'Years and years of consecrated work!' She shrugged her shoulders. 'I'm simply not built for it.'

'Perhaps,' Mr. Blair suggested, 'you may wish to go back to it later on. If so, I should like you to feel free to resume your work; I should like you to look upon me as ready to — ah — help.'

Justine stared at him, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. 'I believe,' she said suddenly, 'that you would rather like me to be an artist — a *real* one.'

'I believe,' said Mr. Blair, 'that your father would have liked it.'

She seemed to find something arresting in his words. 'That's the first time you have ever spoken to me of Roger — isn't it?'

'Yes,' with no hesitation.

She turned from the window and faced Mr. Blair, a little curiously, a little searchingly. 'I wonder,' said Justine, 'I

wonder what you would have thought of each other . . .' And it was the first time she had ever admitted to herself that she wasn't quite sure.

Joan was very much interested in this latest adventure. 'Will you be right in the middle of the city, Justine?'

'Somewhere near it, I expect.'

'And you're going to another studio?'

'Yes — only they call it a school.'

'That doesn't sound as nice. Is Monsieur glad or sorry that you're going?'

Justine bundled up an orange kimono and rammed it into the tray of her trunk. 'He's — sorry.'

'Why?'

'Oh, because . . .'

'Because what, Justine?'

'Well, I expect I'm the freshest of a long line of disappointments in Monsieur's life. He's always hoping and dreaming that one of us will turn out to be an artist — sling over those stockings, Joan — and always we seem to turn out to be half-ones, or no-ones at all.'

'Like Monsieur himself?'

'Yes, only he's hung on. He couldn't bring himself to go into the other. I suppose he'd rather do a third-rate portrait than a first-rate advertisement. Some queer little kink in his make-up! But he's rather splendid all the same, isn't he, Joan?'

'Yes — he knows things, all sorts of things. I like Monsieur . . .' She carried a folio of drawings across the room to the trunk. 'You would rather be a *real* artist, wouldn't you, Justine?'

'Thanks, stick them in there.' She jerked down the lid. 'How did you guess that, Joan?'

'Oh — it shows through.'

'Shows through what?'

'All your pretending,' said Joan.

Justine left at the end of September, as brisk and confident as ever. 'I'll be back at Christmas,' she assured every one breezily. 'And do cheer up, dearest — I might be going to something much worse. Have a little weep on Aunt Win's shoulder, and then forget it!'

But for some time Nellie remained very distressed.

'I don't blame you,' Winnie reiterated with clocklike regularity. 'I don't blame you a bit, darling.' Winnie felt that it was a rather queer thing for a girl to go running off from her home like this. She hoped that nothing peculiar or unpleasant would happen, for dear Nellie's sake . . .

But gradually and inevitably the strangeness wore off — the gloss of a new situation was dulled to harmonize with the plain mass of ordered and regulated living. 'And, after all,' Nellie observed earnestly, 'every one says, dear, that it is so broadening to travel and see places. I expect Justine will learn quite a lot while she is away . . .'

2

A DAY or two before Christmas, while the earth coruscated with the whiteness of a recent snowfall, Joan and Bryce and Justine rambled off through the woods in search of holly and pine sprays. In the middle of the morning, with their bag half-full of greenery, they cleared off some logs down by the frozen stream and rested there for a space in the clean and brilliant sweep of sunshine.

Far off before them the hills were silver with snow and black with spear-tipped pines against the sharp blue of the sky, and all about, for miles and miles, the tingling, windless air held nothing but silence or the occasional chitter of a sparrow tilting above on the gray finger of a birch . . .

Bryce pulled out his pipe and stuffed it leisurely. 'A nice place in which to do nothing,' he observed.

Justine leaned back on her elbows and nodded. 'I'm afraid that I must have an essentially rustic soul. This sort

of thing, for instance, makes me feel thoroughly benign. I want to purr — may I purr, Bryce?'

'You might have a try at it.'

'Thanks, kind gentleman. I may even break into verse; such is the effect of scenery upon a sensitive nature.'

'And what is the effect of New York?'

'Oh, I bellow along with the rest of them — although my loudest never seems to be more than a weak echo of Hell's!'

'Lord! — she must be a terror!'

'Correctly, if crudely, said.'

'What is she really like?' asked Joan.

'Very much the same — only more so. She slams around and gets dinner with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of her mouth — the soup is always more or less ashy. And swearing — Oh, my! Oh, my! Uncle Will would have nine convulsions twice over. She isn't wicked; she's just not nice — common — cheap — whatever you want to call it.'

'Then why on earth do you stick it out?'

'Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I've grown attached to — the wall-paper, say. It's so amusing — hundreds and hundreds of top-heavy little sail-boats with a gull poised neatly over every one. A pink gull, if you please, not an ordinary, every-day affair. And, furthermore, I have a magnificent view from my window right into the private life of a family of eight. Just think of that!'

'I'd rather not!' said Bryce.

'Oh, but they are a very nice eight — even the papa who begins every speech with "Sara, I ask you to listen to this"; Sara being his wife and most devoted audience. Some day when I grow rich I shall buy them a parrot — they're always wanting a parrot; but I shall move first!'

Joan stretched herself out comfortably on a log and stared up through the netted branches of the wood, the morning sun full on her face and in her quiet eyes. 'What is he like — Reggie?' she asked.

'A poor fool,' volunteered Bryce airily, 'who has let himself in for a Hell of a time.'

Justine was silent, scraping the snow off her shoes with a piece of bark.

'I suppose,' Bryce elaborated, 'that he is somewhat crushed and goggle-eyed with a curly mane to go with his moustache and violin, and an air of "Watch me and see what true art is."'

Justine stood up and pitched the strip of bark across the brook with a free swing of her arm. 'No,' she said; 'you are quite wrong — he isn't a bit like that.'

3

As the morning merged into noon, midsummer heat had rolled up over the cottage, wave after wave, lying heavily on everything for miles around, pressing and flattening, until the air seemed solid. Out through the motionless trees the lake flared like a blue flame and beyond it and beyond a stretch of hazy green, the mountains were blurred and half-golden against a vivid sky . . .

Nellie, in the sheerest of pink voile, clipped a handful of nasturtiums and filled the shallow copper bowl in Justine's room. They looked very lovely there on the window-sill, dusky crimson and orange against the honey-colored woodwork. Then she put out two towels and patted the pillows and went into the kitchen to make lemonade.

In less than an hour Justine was coming home for three weeks' vacation; and at the end of the three weeks she was going back as a commercial artist to enter the New York office of Webster and Crane, Printers. At first Nellie had been very shocked and dismayed at this — her daughter working and living away from them permanently in a strange city; breaking up the unity of their home; breaking up the entire order of things. It had seemed inconceivable — just as the war had, just as a score or so of other things had, when first brought to her thought.

But now she felt much better about it, almost pleased, as if she had suggested the venture herself. After all, it was very clever and brave of Justine to want to get on in the world, to be willing to live in a strange city among strange people. It was, Nellie felt, the sort of thing of which Roger would approve. Roger used to say — what was it? Something about standing firm on one's own feet. She couldn't quite remember the words, but she could remember how he looked when he said it — very straight and unafraid, smiling sometimes, the smile she had never understood . . . Yes, Roger would have approved.

And besides it was such a very nice position. Printers — of course printers were always very nice; every one knew that . . .

Nellie chipped off some ice and dropped it clinking into the big yellow jug. What a pretty sound ice made, cool and delicate! She fluffed out her pink voile dress and patted her hair and gave a comfortable little sigh. Everything was in perfect and complete readiness for Justine now; love awaited her, and understanding — and nice cool lemonade.

After supper they all sat out on the big square porch with the breeze from the lake ruffling over them gently: Nellie and Winnie rocking in the shadow of the close birches, Joan on the steps, Valerie-Maud in the hammock, and Justine perched on the railing with an orange kimono wrapped about her.

'Well,' declared Winnie, who had eaten too heavily, but was bearing up very well, 'I think it's wonderful, simply wonderful. If I had to go in an office I'd die of fright, really and truly I would. I'm so ——' she paused and bit off her thread — 'aren't I, Nellie?'

'Yes, dear,' said Nellie.

Justine tilted her head back against the honey-colored post. 'It's going to be splendid,' she declared enthusiastically. 'A job in a hundred, with no end of possibilities tied

on. You ought to have seen the eager mob that applied for it. I hung around with them for a while and then I broke in at a side door, prowled through a room or two, and tackled the first likely looking person I tumbled onto. I told him what I wanted, briefly and firmly, and I got it, by jingo! I think he took me out of sheer astonishment — but in two years' time he'll be telling every one how he recognized my intrinsic value right off the bat.'

Winnie folded up a pair of Hector's socks and gave them a wifely little pat. Dear Hector! his big toes seemed to make *such* holes! 'I don't see how you can be so calm,' she admired and wondered. 'How can you tell that it will turn out all right?'

'Because there is no earthly reason why it shouldn't,' said Justine crisply. 'I'm a good draftsman, I have plenty of ideas and plenty of energy. It will be my own fault if I flunk on the job.'

A little drift of thought passed through Nellie's head. 'How like Roger . . .' She had never been able to stand up to things like that; with a straightness and fearlessness that left one quite alone. 'How like Roger . . .'

'Mercy, aren't you scared?' asked Valerie-Maud languidly. (She was cultivating a little air of languor because she felt that it went rather well with her eyelashes.)

Justine stretched out her arms lazily, and the sun rippled warm and mellow across her orange kimono. 'My dear,' she observed with a yawn, 'I am never scared; it is one — perhaps my only virtue.'

Three days later Winnie and Valerie-Maud returned home.

The evening after they left, Justine strolled into Nellie's room and perched on the end of the bed. 'Let's go out for a paddle,' she suggested; 'a long one! — I'll take you down to that point you like.'

Nellie looked pleased. 'Why, that would be nice, dear. Do

I need a scarf — yes, I'm sure I do, it gets so chilly after sundown. Now where did I put that . . .' she rummaged slowly through the drawer with plump white hands.

Justine sauntered over to the window and stood there, hands in pockets, looking out across the wide and silent lake. 'By the way, Mother — I've asked Reggie to come up here for a few days next week.'

Nellie paused and wrinkled her brows reflectively. 'Well, all right, dear — but I wish you had let me know before.' She made some rapid arrangements in her head: 'They can have Bryce's room — his bed opens up and there is a nice big ——'

Justine interrupted her. 'I said Reggie — not they.'

Nellie stood still with her blue eyes round and a little blank. 'You don't mean by himself, dear?'

'Yes, by himself.'

'But, darling, what about Wilhelmina?'

'She's in Washington for a couple of weeks; and Reggie's having his vacation now. It's all quite simple.'

Nellie's face became full of uneasiness. 'But, dear, I don't think, I really don't think that it would be quite — quite——'

'Is "proper" the word you want?'

'Well, it wouldn't be, dear, would it?'

'I don't know, I'm sure — but it would be jolly practical. He needs a rest in a place like this.'

Nellie grew a little firmer. 'Perhaps he does, Justine; but I think we should consider Wilhelmina.'

'I don't see why. Hell neither gives nor receives consideration. And, besides, she may be flattered at a small tribute to her much-vaunted broad-mindedness . . .'

Nellie sat down with a little plop, which meant that she was upset. 'Really, Justine, it is quite impossible; I don't think it would be right.'

'But the letter has gone.'

'Then you must write and tell him not to come.'

'Why, dearest — what a rude thing to do!'

'I would rather be rude than not nice,' said Nellie with dignity; and then she stopped short and wondered if that were a very discreet thing to say.

Justine came over and sat down beside her. 'Do you think,' she began slowly, 'that if Roger knew some one who was tired — and alone — some one he liked, he would turn him down because he was afraid of not being proper — or not being *thought* proper?'

Nellie thought for a moment; she searched round carefully for a loophole. And then: 'Roger always did what was right, dear.'

Justine lifted her head, and her eyes were clear and straight as if she were looking at Roger. 'Yes,' said Justine, 'I know that; and you can always remember — always — that I will never do anything unless I feel through and through that it is right.'

And the next week Reggie came up to the cottage.

4

Bryce squatted before the ice-chest and cast a ruminative eye over the contents. 'Eggs!' he observed impressively. 'Three nice little eggs. Shall we fry, stew, scramble, bake ——'

'Boil,' said Mr. Blair firmly; 'it's the safest!'

Bryce stretched himself up and grinned. 'I do hope you're not brooding over that last omelet?'

Mr. Blair smiled back. 'On the contrary — I have dismissed it from my thought.'

'Congratulations! — that's more than I have done. But then I made it and the cook always suffers most acutely, they say. I know now just how an artist must feel when his works are destroyed by fire.'

'You bore up very well,' Mr. Blair remarked.

'Unfortunate that the omelet didn't follow my example!' He strolled across the kitchen, juggling casually with the eggs. One of them fell and smashed on the floor with a thin, slamming sound. Bryce stared down at it a little pensively. 'Nothing,' he observed, 'smashes with such beautiful thoroughness as an egg. It's a sort of achievement!'

'It's the third one this week!' Mr. Blair pointed out.

'Well, now, think of that, will you! Out of all the eggs I've been handling in the last seven days, I've smashed only three! It just shows what can be done with care and discretion. And, besides, this time it was rather providential, wasn't it?'

'In what way?'

'Will, two people — three eggs. Consider the complications that would naturally arise — one can't very well cut an egg in half! But the problem, you observe, solved itself quickly and neatly.'

'Very neatly!' Mr. Blair commented. 'Next time you might manage — if it is not asking too much — to drop the problem into the garbage can.'

'Oh, there's nothing like egg for the floors,' Bryce declared airily. 'Gives 'em a rich, smooth finish, shows up the grain, and all that sort of thing . . .' He turned on the tap with one hand and pulled out a saucepan with the other. 'You should study the cook books the way I do, Dad; then you would know whether to consider a thing a calamity or a service!'

Mr. Blair sat down by the table and cut the bread very slowly and precisely as if he were performing an act of the utmost delicacy. The outside slice was dry because Bryce had forgotten to cover it in the morning; Mr. Blair put it beside his own plate — and patted a wrinkle out of the tablecloth.

During supper the conversation was shifting and sketchy.

'I wonder if I have any sort of a chance for Clark's place — that would mean quite a jump in salary, wouldn't it?'

'Turnball is nearer, I think — thanks — more experience, you know.'

'Hm! And with about as much initiative as a fire-engine! – By the way, where's that jelly Mrs. Colins sent over?'

'On the shelf — farther back . . .'

Bryce tipped his chair precariously, and reached for the jar. 'You know,' he said with a sudden drop into another mood, 'I'm worried about Jimmy.'

Mr. Blair looked up inquiringly.

'He seems to have something on his mind — jumpy and nervous and all that sort of thing. Dulcie says it's been going on for a month or so; she's bothered by it, too — more than she wants any one to know . . .'

'But he's always been a little like that, ever since ——'

'That damned gassing! I know!' Bryce's lips tightened. 'Jimmy's a fine fellow,' he said. 'I hope nothing's up with him . . .'

After supper he strolled off to the Colins', hands plunged deep into the pockets of his linen knickers, and a stubby pipe in his mouth.

Mr. Blair watched him from the doorway, and then he turned and climbed slowly up the stairs. It was very dim and very deserted in the second hall. Nellie's room, Joan's room, the one that was always kept ready for Justine, gaped about him emptily just as they used to a long time ago when he and the house and a lingering memory or two lived quietly and alone . . .

He selected four or five travel circulars from the shelf beside his bed, and then sat down close to the narrow window.

Outside the sweeping branches of the old elms framed a short expanse of Longfellow Street shimmering in gold — the mellow and tranquil gold of a waning day. Just across the lawn, the Earls' house rose out of its rusty-green shrubbery, big and substantial and graceless, with everything about it a little worn and very much loved. Hector was

sitting on the front steps smoking morosely, his coat off and folded neatly beside him. He was quite still — like something blocked into the heat and rimmed with gold. A thin thread of music wavered over from the other side of the street — 'The Rosary,' swelling and ebbing, stumbling a bit here and rushing with a clutter of notes farther on, while Mrs. Peter Lipton, no doubt, sucked in her lip and perspired with the effort. From somewhere in the back came the measured whir of a lawn-mower . . . comfortable, familiar sounds, all of them, like the flapping of green shades and the click-click of white dishes handed about the table.

After a while, when the first shadow of dusk filtered over the street, people drifted out onto their front porches and rocked and fanned themselves languidly, and found new aspects of the weather to wonder at and paw over . . .

Up in his room Mr. Blair sat erect and still by the open window, the travel circulars spread out on his knees. A new one — profusely illustrated — had arrived that morning: the Canadian-Pacific *tour-de-luxe* through the Orient. He opened it, fingering the pages leisurely and with infinite care; and as he turned and looked, turned and looked, his shoulders began to hunch forward a little. The old, ever-new enchantment was catching at him again; it was blotting out four walls and an elm-shaded street, blotting out Hector and the wavering thread of music . . .

Other things, other places, lay before Mr. Blair now: the Mediterranean of warm and flaring beauty — and Egypt with its grandeur and its golden desert lands that held the secrets of the ages and bore proudly into the present the great treasures of the past — and Japan, exquisite, fragile, a world of lacy gardens dripping with wistaria and cherry blossoms — many-lanterned China — calm southern seas under silver moons —— Beauty and poignant loveliness lay out before him; beauty and loveliness that were very near now. Some day, quite soon . . .

Mr. Blair sat forward, lost, far away, in thought. Some day, quite soon . . . A long, long dream was coming nearer and nearer, a dream of the Orient with Bryce. The words made a low, crooning music through him: soon — soon — with Bryce. He had waited a very long time for it; as far back as he could remember, he had always been waiting. And always things had come between him and the dream — Joan's mother, Joan, the war — and then Bryce himself, Bryce who had wanted to settle down, wanted to forget . . .

But now — why, now there was nothing to stop it, nothing to push it again into the dimness of the far future. Bryce had forgotten, or nearly forgotten, since Bryce, like Nellie, could open himself to the new things and shut off the old. He was making good at the office; he had found a place for himself as he desired — something to come back to. And the money was ready, the carefully built key which would open the door into the Orient. So there was nothing to stop it now.

Some day, quite soon, he would surprise Bryce with a vacation. They would tell other people that they were taking a vacation; and no one would know — no one would guess — that they were going to slip away into a dream . . . Mr. Blair, hunched over a pile of gaudy travel circulars, smiled to himself, his brown eyes very happy.

Blue dusk sifted through Longfellow Street like a thin, soft veil; it blurred and dimmed the Earls' house, the elm tree just outside, the thousand little keen edges of the day. Hector rose and stretched himself, the wavering thread of music trailed off uncertainly into silence like a voice grown tired . . .

In the shadowed room by the window Mr. Blair sat hunched forward — smiling.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I

Spring came in swiftly and silently on the trail of a long gray rush of showers, and once more the earth was bound in a web of loveliness. The cherry tree beyond the Earls' house foamed ivory-white against the warm blue of the sky, and all down the street the lawns were traced with daffodils and flame-cupped tulips and little lightsome flowers that came early and slipped away too soon.

'Spring! — Spring!' cried Joan, and held her arms wide as if she would have the wonder and beauty of it all blow through and through her like a wind.

And 'Spring!' said Nellie, who liked to tick things off as they appeared; 'spring, dear — isn't it lovely!' Just as one might hold up a nice cake for inspection and approval.

Mr. Blair, at the first frail sign of the season, plunged into his garden and planted seeds with a profound care and thoroughness, a folder of explicit directions held firmly in his hands all the while. Mr. Blair was a great one for directions: little channels of advice, little channels of thought and tradition and formality, all mapped out for him and hallowed by time and usage — these were the things that Mr. Blair accepted and stood by staunchly.

And then, quite suddenly, one fine May evening, Justine strolled home from the station with her bag tucked under one arm and her hat under the other.

'I want a rest,' she explained briefly. 'They've given me my four days because I looked fierce, and work is slack, anyway . . .'

'Oh, darling!' said Nellie, and she was promptly filled with sympathy and tenderness as if a button had been pressed. Dear Justine! She was tired, of course she was. Any one would be tired after working so hard all winter in a strange

city. She needed a nice, cozy little rest at home with plenty of love and care. And she had come back for it — like a child, like a little girl. Dear Justine!

Nellie kissed her and patted her with gentle, soothing fingers; and then she fluttered out into the kitchen and whipped up a frothy little dish of cream and eggs and fat pink cherries — such a nice little thing for some one who was feeling tired . . .

All through the next day Justine was moody and restless, roaming about the house and the garden, and later into the dim woods beyond Wimble Street, her green eyes shadowed and rather secretive, as if they were holding things as pools held light and mirrored darkness. She came back late in the afternoon, and lounged on the steps of the front veranda, smoking slowly and casually, her head tilted against the post in a thin line of shade . . .

Toward supper-time Mr. Blair returned from the office, walking quietly down the long path between tulips and daffodils — the path that was lit with the candles of spring. And as he came nearer and saw Justine, he stiffened ever so slightly, his mouth, his fingers, his whole neat little body.

'Hullo,' she said airily. 'Your shoe-lace is undone, Uncle Will.'

Mr. Blair went one degree stiffer. For some indefinable reason he disliked having Justine discover his shoe-lace undone; it was as if she had seized the first advantage in a curious game between them. He stood at the head of the path, his hands clasped tightly behind his back.

Justine flicked an ash over the tulip-bed, and then took a deep, slow puff. 'Anything the matter?' she asked coolly; and there were little green glints of mockery in her eyes.

Mr. Blair was silent a moment, gathering courage; and then the words came popping out, sharp as pennies against stone: 'I wish you wouldn't do that while you are here, Justine.'

'Do what?'

'I fancy you know what I mean.'

She tilted the cigarette between two slim fingers. 'You refer to this?'

'I do.'

'But why on earth shouldn't I?'

'Because,' said Mr. Blair with dignity, 'I do not wish it to be done here.'

Justine narrowed her eyes, and all the restlessness and uncertainty of the day crystallized into deliberate bravado. 'Do tell me why,' she requested; 'I'm enormously interested.'

Mr. Blair stood his ground firmly. 'I have never permitted a wrong thing or a vulgar thing to be done in my home, Justine, and I never shall. I trust you see my point.'

She twirled the cigarette airily. 'And is this particular thing wrong or vulgar?'

'It is both,' said Mr. Blair to whom wrong things were always vulgar, and vulgar things always wrong.

'But isn't that really a matter of opinion?'

'It is a matter of principle.'

'And convention?'

'The right kind of convention — certainly.'

Justine yawned. 'It must be very impressive to feel one's self upheld and sustained by the judgment of a thousand years — it probably isn't a thousand years, but never mind; antiquity gives such weight, such emphasis, such indisputable dignity ——'

Mr. Blair's face grew as red as a poppy under his white straw hat.

'Anyhow,' continued Justine a little more crisply, but still without heat, 'don't you think this dictating is rather out of place, Uncle Will? Why, I'm not even your daughter!' And her words were carefully pointed to scratch his pride.

Mr. Blair stopped rocking back and forth on his toes.

'Perhaps not,' he said sharply, 'but you will remember that I am master of this house!' And as soon as he had spoken, his little speech seemed weak, almost banal, like something worn thin with overuse.

'Oh, very well,' returned Justine laconically. 'Of course, if you want to drag up *that* point . . .' She tossed the cigarette into the tulip-bed and strolled across the veranda with a swinging ease. And then she said 'Damn!' very loudly, and slammed the door after her as she entered the hall.

2

JOAN came up across the shadow-dappled lawn, her hair whipped back by the wind and her eyes as tranquil and aloof as the sky itself.

The elms far up above were swirling and swaying with unrest, and Nellie's cushion-padded chair, empty on the porch in a pool of sunshine, rocked backward and forward with a calm and sedate leisure. Joan laughed as she watched it — such a well-bred, well-fed sort of chair with its substantial curves and plump upholstery. While Aunt Nellie attended Mrs. Colins's bridge-party, it remained at home, facing the street blandly with the manner of one who holds an established place in the world. You almost felt as if you should say good-afternoon to it, and remark upon how well it looked. A nice, fat little chair, somewhat smug, rather worn, that clasped Aunt Nellie firmly and faithfully like a very old friend . . .

Inside the house everything was dim and silent: a gleam of polished walnut from the room across the hall — the long, creamy sweep of draperies — the tilted mirror over the mantel that held a tree, a rush of daffodils, and a brief strip of gold-and-shadowed street beyond. She left her books on the table and ran up the stairs, up a slanting trail of sunshine rippling in from the window at the top.

The door of Justine's room was open, and Justine herself

was squatting on the rug, thrusting things swiftly and indiscriminately into her traveling-bag. She raised her eyes for a moment and nodded. 'Hello, Joanie — throw over that slipper, will you — the green one. Thanks.' She stuffed it into a corner, banging the heel impatiently with her fist. 'Sit down and talk to me, there's a dear; I'm horribly tired of thinking . . .'

Joan curled up on the floor with the tall shining window at her back. 'Why are you packing now, Justine?'

'Because I'm leaving this afternoon.'

'Instead of to-morrow?'

'Yes — instead of to-morrow.'

They were both silent a moment. And then: 'Why aren't you staying?'

'Because there would be no point to it; I've got what I want now — what I came for.'

'You mean — a rest?'

'No, more than that.'

'I see; something important — something *inside*.'

Justine glanced up again, and for an instant her eyes held a quiet, half-groping look. 'Yes — something important.' She wedged in a last roll of silk and closed the bag with a snap. 'Do you want to hear about it, Joan?'

'If you would like me to know.'

She hesitated a moment. 'I believe I would. And then you can tell Mother to-morrow, — some one will have to, and I don't feel up to facing it . . .'

'Why?'

'Oh, she won't understand,' said Justine, a little wearily; 'she will go round and round in circles, and she will cry . . . After a while she will probably accept it — but she will never understand.'

'I see,' said Joan.

Then Justine leaned back and began to talk in a casual, unconcerned manner, as if she were relating a story that no

one was particularly interested in. 'You remember Reggie, I suppose?'

Joan nodded.

'Well, to-morrow he leaves for Chicago; he has a new position there, a fine one — just the sort of thing he has always wanted. He leaves to-morrow — and I am going with him.' Her voice stopped as if it had been abruptly clipped off.

Joan traced and retraced a wavering leaf-pattern on the floor, very slowly and dreamily, as if her thoughts were a thousand leagues away.

'Why don't you look shocked?' Justine demanded.

'I don't think I know how to.'

'Well, you ought to. Nice people always look shocked when they're brought up against something they can't understand. It's natural — as Mother would observe — and so damned easy!'

'It's silly,' said Joan, and that matter was dismissed.

'Then tell me what you're thinking.'

'I don't know enough about it yet to think anything in particular. Do you want to tell me some more?'

Justine shrugged her shoulders carelessly. 'It's all so trite, of course — skipping off with somebody else's husband, letting yourself in for the Lord knows what. It isn't even ——'

'Oh, don't tell me like that,' said Joan quickly. 'Don't pretend ——'

Something in Justine seemed to give way — something hard and elaborately casual. Her fingers twisted over the handle of the bag and gripped it tightly. 'How do you want me to tell it?' she asked, and it was a new voice speaking of new things . . .

'From the beginning,' said Joan; 'and straight, — and quiet — like your Roger.'

'But — it's hard to find the words, Joan.'

'Then I'll start you, shall I? — just as if we were making

something up . . .' She folded her hands in her lap and said very slowly: 'Once — upon — a — time ——'

And after a moment of quietness Justine went on: 'There was a man who played a violin — played it beautifully and lovingly, when he was happy and when he was lonely and when he was hurt . . . And the man had a wife — it was all a dreadful mistake, his having a wife — one of those things that happen suddenly and madly and can never be explained. His wife was an overwhelming sort of person who bashed and grabbed her way through life — knocking over other people, upsetting, breaking . . . And she hated violins, hated the music that the man made and the things he tried to say in it. She jabbed him about it, day after day, month after month . . . sending out words, like arrows, to hurt him . . .'

'Perhaps,' said Joan, 'she didn't realize that they hurt.'

'No — sometimes I think that she didn't; because he was quiet, and she couldn't understand quietness — only noise. But, anyhow, the beautiful, fine things that the man so wanted to do were always just over the edge of the present — never any nearer, never any more real. And then one day, I — somebody else — came . . . There really isn't much more, Joan; you can see it without my telling.'

'Then I'll go on for a little while, and you can come back in again when you want to.' Joan sat up, slim and straight against the shining window. 'This somebody who came was, perhaps, a little bit like the wife on top, but underneath she was — oh, quite different. And the man who played the violin reached the underneath part. And because, day after day, she saw and heard this unfairness, she began to feel terribly sorry for him. And every time he was hurt she was angry — and then, later on, she was hurt too —— You must stop me if I make a mistake, Justine.'

'You haven't made one yet; go on.'

'Well, after a while the man found out that she understood, and he was grateful — yes, he must have been awfully grate-

ful. And they both loved the violin and the things he tried to say with it — and then after a while they loved one another. That must have been when you moved away ——'

'Yes,' said Justine, 'that was the time.'

'Do you want to come back into the story yet?'

'No — you go on.'

'Well, then, this somebody moved away because she wanted to be honest — perhaps she wanted to see if she could get over it and not think about the man with the violin. But it didn't do any good, did it?'

Justine shook her head.

'Well, now you must go on,' said Joan, 'because I don't know any more.'

'But there isn't any more — except to-morrow.'

'And what is to-morrow going to do?'

Justine was silent a moment, and then she tilted back her head. 'It is going to give Reggie his chance to do those beautiful things — and it is going to give me my chance to help.'

'And Wilhelmina?' asked Joan in a casual, musing voice.

'It isn't leaving her altogether in the lurch; she has a good job and plenty of friends, or friends of a sort . . . She doesn't know anything about this yet; I expect it will be rather a — shock.'

'She hasn't guessed, then?'

'No, I don't think so. Hell is sure, so damned sure, of what she does and what she has; it keeps her from seeing and knowing a lot of things.'

'But this time,' said Joan — 'this time you are terribly sorry for her.'

Justine's fingers gripped the handle very tightly. 'Yes — yes, of course. But I am thinking of Reggie, not of her. You can't act for every one, you simply can't. And she has never been fair to him, Joan; I've sat and watched it for hours — nothing but stinging gibes at the things he loves, nothing but

swagger and strut. Oh, it was rotten — rotten! Sometimes I felt as if I should hit her!'

'But why didn't Reggie stand up for the things that he loves — stand up for himself?'

Justine didn't answer for a moment; and then: 'He isn't like that,' she said slowly, almost caressingly. 'He is a little like Monsieur; and Monsieur wouldn't fight for himself you know . . .'

'I see,' said Joan.

'And that was what made it so cruel; he couldn't hit back because he isn't made that way.'

'And so you are going to hit back for him.'

'What makes you say that, Joan?'

'Oh, I don't know. But tell me who first suggested it.'

'Suggested what?'

'The to-morrow part. Who first thought of that?'

Justine stared far off through the shining window. 'I did. Reggie would never ask me to do a thing like that for him. He is too — too —— Oh, I don't know. But he wouldn't do it, he would never do it . . .'

'And why did you?'

'Because,' said Justine proudly, 'I wanted him to know that I was big enough — I wanted him to know that I wasn't afraid.'

'And he agreed?'

'Yes — he agreed.'

Joan began to trace the leaf-pattern again, slowly, carefully, while the spring sunshine wavered over her. The scalloped edges of the shadows flurried and merged when the wind outside swept through the branching elm; and then they grew still again — green patterns on a golden floor . . .

'What are you thinking about?' asked Justine.

Joan looked off through the garden with musing eyes. 'About last summer at the cottage.'

'When Reggie was there?'

'Yes.'

'And what are you thinking about it?'

'I am remembering another day when you suggested something and he — agreed . . .'

'Tell me about it.'

'Well, it was a most lovely morning, one of those dripping, golden ones after a night of rain; and you asked Reggie to go climbing. You said, "Come on, I want to go, don't you?" And after the smallest moment Reggie agreed. So you went off climbing through the lovely morning, and when you came back later on, *you* strode up the pine path very fresh and lively, as if you were just starting out, but Reggie — Reggie was stumbling and tired.'

Justine stared down at her twisted fingers. 'Well — what is that supposed to be?'

'It was just something I was remembering,' said Joan.

They were both silent in the silent house, while the wind drew little threads of sound through the air outside. And then: 'Tell me what you are really thinking, Joan.'

'What I am really thinking?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, that isn't what people want very often, you know.'

'I do — I learned it from Roger.'

Joan cupped her chin in her hands and spoke quietly, almost dreamily. 'You know, Justine, ever since you came to live here — and for a long time before, I expect — you have always got what you wanted and gone where you wanted — always — every time. You are strong; you can ride over other people and what other people think and say; you can carry things forward like — a wind. But you are honest about it — as far back as I can remember you have always been honest, Justine, with yourself and with other people. That makes it rather splendid in a way; but don't you think that sometimes — just sometimes — it may turn out wrong?'

'In what way?'

'Well, for instance, you might want something so badly, so terribly badly, that you would make another person think that he wanted it too — and make both of you feel that it was right.'

Justine stared at her for a moment; and then, 'You mustn't say that!' she exclaimed sharply. 'You have no right to say that!'

'But I am only wondering, Justine — it may not be any more true than a shadow.'

'What makes you wonder?'

'I don't know exactly. Just little things from here and there; from you and from what I saw of Reggie. Somehow they all fit in, like bits in a puzzle. I wish they didn't; I wish there was nothing about them to make me wonder . . .'

Justine spoke very deliberately, very clearly, as if each word were bitten off: 'Then, to be quite definite, what you think is that I am forcing Reggie to let me run away with him.' And after she had said it she grew suddenly angry. 'You have no right, Joan, no right to think such a thing!' Her voice was sharp and a little unsteady as if something deep inside of her had been frightened.

'But I don't mean it that way, Justine; I don't mean you would purposely set out to do it. But when some one has carried so many things through, over and over again, in spite of people and what people say, it must become a sort of — habit; unconscious like breathing. And you have done it so often, Justine — and so successfully.'

'Good Lord! you talk as if I were some sort of tyrant. Do you suppose that it is easy for me to do this — easy to smash up Mother's trust; easy to give Hell the hardest blow of her life; and to cut all my work just as I'm coming out on top of it? Do you suppose all this is a mere flip of the fingers? I know what I'm leaving, and I know what I'm letting myself in for — but I'd do it ten times over, do you hear, ten times over — for Reggie!'

Joan sat up straight and eager against the sunny window. 'Oh, Justine, that part *is* splendid, your unafraidness and your loyalty! But if it is only you who are carrying it through — not you and Reggie — then don't you see, it is a sort of mock splendor, a fine bravery covering up something little?'

'Little . . .' repeated Justine in a remembering voice.

'Yes — yes, don't you see? You must be so sure, so awfully sure. Reggie is grateful to you, of course, because you have always stood for everything that Wilhelmina knocks down; but does he honestly and truly want you to do this? At the cottage you arranged so many things, Justine — and he agreed; perhaps because he is the agreeing kind . . . But you would never be happy with only that, Justine; it would take ever so much more. You would have to get what you gave, wouldn't you? And stand very close together, seeing the same and thinking the same. You might be able to start it off — but you couldn't keep it going alone. There would have to be two for that.'

'There *are* two,' said Justine sharply.

'Are you sure — sure? Because, don't you see, if he has only gratitude, that isn't enough. He could give his gratitude to you and his love to somebody else, perhaps — there might be somebody else, Justine, he's such an agreeing kind . . . You would never be safe in spite of your splendid bravery, in spite of giving up everything for what you want most.'

'You mustn't talk like this — you mustn't . . .' almost a whisper.

'Oh, Justine, don't waste your splendid bravery on it if it's only a little thing! Keep it to go on with alone!'

And suddenly Justine went very white. 'I don't want to be alone,' she said. 'I want him — I want him.' And her fingers were tense and strained around the handle of the bag.

Joan sat erect against the shining window, rimmed with the mellowing gold of late afternoon. She didn't speak for a

moment, but the pause was bridged with silent sympathy. 'I wish your Roger were here, Justine; he would be able to help you, wouldn't he?'

'But I know what Roger would want me to do; I know it clearly, just as if he were speaking to me . . .' She stared across the room with shadowed eyes. 'He would want me to go ahead with what I feel is right — go ahead without fear, and in spite of every one and everything.'

'If you feel it is right.'

'Of course — of course,' a little impatiently.

'But it would have to be unswervingly and absolutely right, wouldn't it, to make up for what it is going to do to other people?'

Justine's voice sharpened again. 'Other people have nothing to do with it, Joan, nothing whatever. I am cutting them off and standing on my own feet, quite by myself. I am making my own life, because I have the right to!'

'But I wonder if we can ever cut ourselves off without hurting somebody else. It's just as if we were all laced together with little strings — whether we like it or not. And if we are pulled, then we lose ourselves; and if we pull, then we hurt some one near us. I suppose,' reflectively, 'it takes a great deal of care and a great deal of wisdom to live in the middle.'

'Then you think I should give up the biggest thing in my life simply because it is going to jolt other people!'

Joan shook her head. 'No, I don't mean that; I mean that what you are planning now — the to-morrow part — must be tremendously big and tremendously fine to make up for all the hurts it is bound to give — to your people, and to Wilhelmina and her people, and to Reggie's people. If it is only a little thing, then it is cruel, to you and to every one else . . .'

Justine pushed back her hair wearily. 'I suppose that the crux of the matter is that you think this — wicked. You're

just like the others, after all, drawing a line through everything in the world and calling one half good and the other bad — and making up your conclusions from the labels.'

'No,' said Joan thoughtfully; 'I don't believe that — and you don't either.' She was quiet a moment, and then: 'Doing what you want to do is often — nearly always, perhaps — on the wrong side of the line. But there may be times when it is really big, something taking great courage and honesty. Then it would make up for all the jolts because it would be bigger than the things it was running against; and in some way people would know it, I guess; and then they wouldn't be hurt. But when it is on the wrong side it is — oh, miserable!'

'But why do you have to believe that I am on the wrong side, Joan?' — a little pathetic, a little appealing, after that old bravado.

'Because of those things that fit together — your arranging it all and carrying it through, your being so strong and his being so — agreeing.' She looked up from the wavering leaf-patterns. 'I suppose, Justine, you found Reggie his new position — the kind he has always wanted?'

Justine was silent a moment. 'Yes,' she said honestly.

Joan's eyes grew dark and troubled. 'You see, Justine, that's what makes me wonder. It isn't a matter of running away,— but of running away fairly and squarely. Perhaps it would be wrong, anyhow; I don't know, but it would be a thousand times wrong to start out falsely!'

'I'm not; I'm giving up everything for Reggie; I'm willing to — I want to!'

'But are you wanting it for him, too? Are you carrying it through by yourself, just as you have so often before?'

'No — no. We both want it, both of us!'

It was a voice holding fast to something, desperately fast . . .

Joan sat up straight and slim against the shining window

and a spring-bound world. 'Oh, Justine, be honest with yourself as you have always been! You mustn't — you *mustn't* go back on your Roger now!'

3

NELLIE pushed her chair up to the window, and sat there rocking gently and leisurely between the looped-back curtains. Outside the spring was laced with silver rain. The tulip-beds and lilting daffodils were half-sheltered under the great spray of elms, but farther along, in a billowing line at the edge of the garden, the lilacs were wet and dripping . . .

Nellie's thoughts wavered drowsily from point to point: Bryce was late this evening, the Colins again, perhaps . . . too bad Justine had hurried off so suddenly — dear Justine, she was always doing sudden things and strange things; a little like Roger . . . like Roger . . . How sweet drenched lilacs were, in a garden, at dusk . . .

The rain made a soothing, purring sound, falling through shadowy elms into the lifted cups of a hundred tulips and a hundred dim-traced daffodils. And above the frail scent of the scattered flowers came a deeper sweetness, old and precious with memories. Wet lilac, blotted against the sky; purple and blue merging into a dove-wing gray . . . white-blurred and misted with the silver of falling rain . . .

Nellie held her hands to her heart, and her eyes grew quiet, very quiet. The blue dusk was laced with rain and fragrant with billowing lilac . . . A memory of something — of some one very dear — came in the dusk with the lilac.

Upstairs beside another window, in the pale light of the lamp, Joan and Mr. Blair were dusting and resorting the stacks of frayed old catalogues. Now and then they stopped to read a bit, or look a while; to point out, perhaps, some painted city with its domes and minarets cutting sharply into the sun, and its strange, rich tapestry of moving throngs . . .

'We shall go there too,' Mr. Blair would say.

And Joan would nod — understanding it was Bryce — and stroke her fingers a little wistfully across the glowing colors.

At the back of the bottom shelf they found a bundle of old magazines, wedged in tightly and blurred with dust. The pages were faintly yellow — scorched by time — and they held a half-fragrance, delicate and rather poignant like the breath of forgotten days. Joan sat back on her heels, and opened the covers gently, blowing off the dust. She dipped about and read here and there, with a casual interest at first, and then with something more than interest, while the rain ran silver fingers through the wind outside . . .

Words that had once been written with fire were a little dim now; some of their meanings had been sapped away by the years; some of their fine scorn was no longer called for. Allusions — names — they seemed nearly all out of date, landmarks in a scene that belonged only to memory. And yet behind them there was something that still beat with life, something fearless and utterly indomitable before all the claims of time.

Joan turned the faded pages very gently, one by one, leaves of thought that somebody had left behind. 'Roger's?' she said.

Mr. Blair nodded.

'Then you did know him, after all.'

'I never met him.'

She waved that aside. 'I mean through — these.'

Mr. Blair stared at the magazines thoughtfully. 'A little, perhaps. And I wrote to him several times — about articles of his — and once he wrote back, I remember. A very fine letter, *very*.'

Joan went on blowing dust from the pages, her hands moving quietly and lightly. Then she looked up. 'I know him too — through *them*.'

Mr. Blair nodded.

'It's rather strange about Roger,' Joan continued, half to herself. 'Neither of us has ever seen him, and yet — sometimes — I think we understand more about him than they do . . .

The rain wove a gentle pattern of sound, over and over and twice again, outside among the elms; and they heard it dimly in the room as they might have heard birds' wings on the air or the flutter of restless leaves . . .

'Aunt Nellie must always have been reaching,' said Joan, 'without ever really getting near to him. And Justine' — she paused at Justine's name: 'I think he must have loved her the best.'

Downstairs a window was shut in the face of the damp evening.

'And that's why we have to take care of her — and take care of all of them. Their Roger should have been the one to do it, but he isn't here . . .' Joan leaned forward and cupped her chin in her hands. 'It's queer how things work out, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Blair.

'They were left alone, and we were left alone — and then somehow we all came together and grew into one another's lives. And now you and I have to understand and look after Roger's children, because there is no one else to do it.'

'Their mother ——' Mr. Blair reminded her.

Joan shook her head. 'Aunt Nellie lives inside a little world of her own, where nothing uncomfortable or upsetting is ever supposed to happen; and when it *does* happen, she gets all muddled up, with nothing to hang on to. Then after a while she smooths herself out again and accepts it — but she hardly ever understands.'

Mr. Blair's chivalry raised a slight wall of defense. 'It isn't her fault,' he said; and then he could find nothing further to build with.

Joan went on talking, a little gravely, as if she were drawing up a verbal chart to show just where they all stood: 'Bryce and Justine don't chat about their affairs to her or ask her advice — you must have noticed that. They wait until a thing is quite settled, quite definite, then they let her know what they are going to do — like the art lessons, and the war, and all the others . . . If Roger were here, they would talk things over with him, I expect, because he would have something worth while to give them. But they seem to have grown rather afraid of Aunt Nellie — afraid of muddling her up all over again . . .'

'But she wants — and tries — to help them.'

'I know,' said Joan. 'And that is why I love her, and why I'm so dreadfully sorry for her.' She looked down at the old magazines in her lap — Roger's long-ago work. 'It's like a trust,' she decided; 'you and I have got to understand them and stand by them, because there is nobody else.'

'I shall always endeavor to do so,' said Mr. Blair.

Joan was silent a moment, and then: 'Because of that, I think I shall tell you about Justine.'

He waited for her to begin, his face turned to the rain-threaded night . . .

'This afternoon,' Joan related quietly, 'she called me into her room and told me something; she told me that to-morrow she is going away with Reggie — Wilhelmina's husband.'

After a pause he repeated, a little blankly: 'Going away . . .'

'To live, you know.'

And at that Mr. Blair grew suddenly and strangely rigid.

'But I don't believe it,' Joan went on, and her voice was clear and unwavering. 'Justine doesn't do things dishonestly — she never has, as far back as I've known her. And so I don't believe she will do this . . .' Her eyes searched his face in the dim light from the lamp. 'What do you think?' she asked.

The rain whirled through the window for a moment, bringing the fragrance of a cool, dripping garden . . .

When Mr. Blair spoke each word of his judgment was bitten off sharply, decisively: 'It is wicked!' he said.

'Perhaps . . .' but Joan was seeing it a little differently.

He stood up with a jerk and walked across the room. 'We must stop her — she mustn't do this, she *mustn't* ——' Already he was fashioning bludgeons of words to break up this wicked thing.

Joan shook her head. 'You can't interfere that way with Justine. You can talk to her quietly, perhaps, and remind her of things . . . But she will have to stop herself.'

'It is our duty,' he persisted. (And round and round in his head like some tragic refrain: 'How can you lower yourself to sin . . . how can you break your mother's heart . . .')

She pushed that aside, trying to make herself clear: 'We talked it all over before she left; but I can't decide for Justine, and you can't — even Roger wouldn't be able to if he were here. We can only believe in her — and be kind.'

His thoughts led quickly to another point: 'When is her mother to be told?'

Joan hesitated a moment, and then she went on with something sure and unswerving in her voice: 'I don't believe Aunt Nellie need ever know. It would be so terrible to her — even without its happening; it would throw her into the worst muddle of her life — and she would never really understand Justine's bigness . . .'

'What bigness?' asked Mr. Blair.

'The honesty that is going to make her not do it.'

'You have great faith in Justine.'

Joan held the magazines in both hands, and stared at them. 'Yes,' she said slowly, 'and I think it is because of — Roger.'

Somewhere downstairs a door was opened and shut again with a bang.

'To-morrow you will know if I am right; and if I am — then this will always be a secret between us, and after a while it will be only a memory . . .'

Some one was running up the stairs, brisk pads of sound in the quiet house.

'You promised to stand by them with me,' said Joan; 'they have nobody else to do it.'

And then Bryce came into the room.

Mr. Blair turned round from the window, and the tenseness went out of his face as, for a moment, Justine went out of his thought. 'Wet?' he asked.

'More or less — but it's a nice kind of wet ——' He threw his coat across the end of the bed, and sat down. 'Oh, hello, Joan; I didn't see you there.'

'Am I in the way?'

Bryce smiled at her. 'No — I don't think you ever are.' And then he suddenly got up and closed the door.

'He is shutting out Aunt Nellie,' Joan thought; and she was filled with a swift, keen pity . . .

Bryce came back and sat down again; but something in his manner had changed, a veil of nonchalance had been dropped leaving him peculiarly uneasy. 'It's Jimmy,' he explained, as if they had asked a question. 'He's in the devil of a mess . . .'

Joan and Mr. Blair waited for him to go on.

'I want you to understand,' said Bryce, 'and not blame him too much.' He repeated it in an urgent, rather strained voice: 'I *do* want you to understand!'

Still they were silent, more than half-lost in other thoughts . . .

'He wouldn't have done it if he'd been all right — we've got to remember that. You know what he's like now, and you know why! He'd never have done it if he'd been feeling steady; we can't blame him too much, we have no right to ——'

'What has he done?' asked Mr. Blair.

Bryce leaned forward, staring at the floor, and talked very rapidly as if he were half-afraid of his own words: 'You know that Rochester fellow who was here? He got hold of Jimmy — almost fooled Rollins and Dick too; I don't know yet what it was all about — but Jimmy fell for his stuff; he got worked up over it, you know how he does. It seemed O.K. — he acted like a damned fool, put in three thousand — and — and took the money from old Chivvers ——'

Mr. Blair's voice snapped out like a whip: 'He *what?*'

'Oh, I know it's rotten and all that — I'm not defending him altogether. But he would never have done it if he'd been himself, you know he wouldn't have! He just lost his head — he ——'

'He stole it!' Mr. Blair said, shocked and incredulous.

Bryce tried to blunt the sharp edge of his words: 'It was so damned easy. You know how things are managed at Chivvers' — always in a muddle, and everything left about — you *can* do things there! Jimmy thought he'd get it all back the end of this month, every cent of it. It seemed so simple, so *sure*, nothing more than a temporary loan — and now' — he looked up a little tragically — 'and now the whole damned thing's fallen through!'

Mr. Blair was stiff and thin-lipped. 'You mean — he has lost everything?'

'Yes.'

'It was a swindle?'

Bryce nodded. 'He was a fool — a fool ——'

'Who knows about it?' asked Joan.

'Dulcie — and us.'

'Nobody else?'

He shook his head.

'How has Dulcie taken it?'

'Like a brick! She says she'll put the baby in a nursery and go out working to help pay it back.'

'He stole it!' Mr. Blair repeated. It seemed impossible, almost fantastic. Jimmy, who had played marbles under the elms of Longfellow Street . . .

Bryce held to his point doggedly and loyally: 'He isn't really a criminal, you know that! There's not a rotten thing about Jimmy — he just lost his head; that fellow got him worked up until he didn't know where he was. And then this — simply happened! I've never seen any one as miserable over anything; it isn't the money, it's what he's *done*. He wants to go and tell Chivvers; he wants to go and tell everybody — and he would, too, if he were alone!'

They were silent a moment, and then Joan spoke: 'Mr. Chivvers doesn't know anything?'

'Not yet.'

'What's he like?'

'As good as the next — but people don't stand for *this* in business!'

'Certainly not!' said Mr. Blair.

'But surely there's some one to help him out?'

'Who? Dulcie's people would collapse and make hell for her; and the Colinses — I think he'd rather die than tell his mother!'

'And yet he told Dulcie.'

'She's different — things don't smash her up.'

'He should have thought of all this — before!' said Mr. Blair in the same stunned voice. Jimmy, who had clipped his front lawn years ago, and pulled up all the daffodil shoots by mistake . . .

'Oh, I know, I know ——'

'The point is that he didn't!' Joan observed. 'And now it's all come on top of him at once. We've got to do something, we've got to help . . .'

Then Mr. Blair spoke, very slowly, very firmly, as if he were repeating something memorized long ago: 'He has committed a theft, he has done wrong, and therefore it is

only just that he pay the penalty.' It sounded absolute and unchallenged.

Bryce was silent a moment, and then he suddenly stood up. 'I want you to know about Jimmy,' he said; 'I want you to know what he means to me. When we were out there he saved my life once. That sort of thing was done a lot then, but it doesn't lessen its value. He saved my life, you understand, and that's why I'm going to stand by him now.'

'No,' thought Joan quickly, 'that is only an excuse — you would have done it, anyway . . .'

Mr. Blair's eyes searched his face, and something flickered deep within them. 'What are you going to do?' he asked.

Bryce walked restlessly across the room. 'We have to get the money back — right away — before it's too late. Everything depends on it; we can't stand by and see a family wrecked just because of three thousand dollars. We simply can't do it!'

'But what are you going to do?'

Bryce stopped short and looked at him, and his eyes asked the question before he spoke: 'Can't you help us, Dad?'

'I don't understand.'

'You have the money.'

Before the open window with its drenched elm and clearing sky, Mr. Blair was suddenly very still, his hands clasped tightly behind his back, his head turned away from them . . . When he spoke it was in a low and changed voice: 'I have been saving that money, Bryce, for — something else.'

'But this would only take part of it — and we'll pay you back, every last cent of it ——'

'We?'

'Yes.' He began to talk swiftly and eagerly: 'I've thought this out: Jimmy and Dulcie can manage half — it'll take them time, but they'll never go back on you. And I'll see to the other; it's little enough, God knows, in return for — your life!' He went on with a sort of impetuous anxiety: 'Turn-

ball's leaving at the end of the month, and I've asked Henderson to let me have a go in his place. He said he would if it was all right with you — said you'd spoken to him some thing about an extended vacation for us both ——'

'Yes,' Mr. Blair interrupted, 'I wanted ——'

But Bryce swept on quickly: 'I don't want a vacation, I want to help Jimmy; and if I get Turnball's place I can make up my half of the money in no time, you see that, don't you? It'll mean grinding away for a bit, but I know I can do it!'

Mr. Blair was silent.

'He has no one else to go to, Dad, no one — everything depends upon us . . .'

Mr. Blair rocked back and forth on his toes.

'We can't stand by and see them all hit; we've got to help . . .'

'But he is a thief!' One last effort to hold to a slipping rope.

'He is Jimmy,' said Bryce simply.

No one spoke for a moment. The room was very quiet; even the rain had stopped outside to make way for the white fire of stars . . .

'Well?' asked Joan, and her voice seemed a part of the evening silence and stillness.

'I told him you would understand,' said Bryce, a little bitterly. 'Somehow — I felt sure, when you knew he had helped me out there ——'

At that Mr. Blair turned slowly from the window. His face was pale against the dripping black of the elm, pale with shadowed eyes. 'I see.' The words sounded thin, almost empty; they seemed to be coming from a long way off. 'Of course — I see now.'

'You'll stand by us?' demanded Bryce.

'Yes, yes — of course.'

'Oh, I say, that's fine of you, Dad, that's really ——'

But something else slipped into the room. 'Bryce!' Nel-

lie's voice, very high and clear, coming from the downstairs hall.

It suddenly reminded him. 'Don't tell Mother; please don't. We can carry this through by ourselves. She'd never get it straight, she'd never understand ——'

'Bryce!' — a little higher.

'All right,' he called.

Joan nodded in agreement. 'Aunt Nellie never need know.'

'I've made some hot chocolate, darling, with marshmallow ——'

'Oh!' he turned away with an impatient gesture.

'No — no,' said Joan quickly, 'go down, you mustn't refuse her — when it is all she can give.'

Bryce went out and closed the door after him, and the room was left very quiet again . . .

Joan gathered together Roger's magazines and put them back on the shelf, old and faintly yellowed, but with all the dust blown away. Then she got up and walked over to the window where Mr. Blair stood. The rain was shining on everything outside, silver and cool, and a frail moon was stepping lightly above the mist of cherry blossoms two gardens away. The world was very lovely and fragrant with its wet flowers and slow spring wind . . .

Something dropped from Mr. Blair's hand, and Joan picked it up. A crumpled catalogue, with colors a little false beside the still white beauty of the night . . .

'You had made a plan,' said Joan softly.

'Yes.'

She slipped her hand through his arm. 'I see.'

They watched the moon in silence for a moment, and then: 'That letter Roger wrote you a long time ago; have you still got it?'

He dragged himself back to her words: 'A letter ——'

'Roger's.'

'Oh — yes, I suppose so.'

'May I have it?'

'If you want it.'

'I should like to send it away to Justine,' said Joan. 'Perhaps it will help her to know you as Bryce and I do.' Then suddenly she lifted her face to the wind and the sky. 'We have done two things for Roger to-day . . .'

But Mr. Blair didn't hear her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I

THE windows were wide open and the curtains drawn back because Nellie loved to have sunshine splashing over the breakfast-table. It made the little glasses of marmalade such a rich, glowing gold, and the eggs so creamy, and the thin old silver so delicate and glittering against the white cloth. More than that, it seemed to lap about her softly and soothingly — waves of spring sunshine that rode over every small ridge of care, leveling it to the flatness of serenity . . .

'Oh, what a beautiful day!' she said, and her voice had little wings fashioned wholly of happiness. 'How many, William — two? — please have two, they look so nice ——' Her plump hands moved surely among the dishes. 'Toast, Joan. Is it burnt, dear? — yes, it is; William, pass Joan another piece of toast — oh, please, darling, I want you to! *And* the salt — *there* ——' A comfortable little flurry of preparations, then the cool click-click of silver against thin white plates.

Bryce came in late and rather abruptly as if he had remembered breakfast at the last moment.

She looked up and nodded brightly. 'Good-morning, dear; isn't it a beautiful day!'

'Oh — good-morning.' He gave her his attention for a moment and then slid back into thought.

Nellie, watching him, was filled with a little rush of sympathy. 'He didn't sleep well,' she decided. Poor darling, that must be it. She stopped eating and tried to think of something to offer him . . . 'Bryce, dear — an apple?'

'No, thanks.'

'Oh, *please;* they're always so refreshing in the morning.'

'No, thanks — I don't like them.'

'Why, darling, I never knew that ——'

'Sugar, Joan; thanks.'

'Is it just this kind or all apples?'

'Oh, I don't know.' Then he tried to curb his impatience: 'This kind, I expect.'

'Why, what is the matter with them, dear?'

'They're flabby,' put in Joan. 'The mail is late on Saturdays, isn't it?'

'A quarter-past,' said Mr. Blair. And then, for her: 'I shall wait until it comes this morning.'

She nodded.

'Well, I wonder what kind they are, because I must be careful not to ask for them again. Do you know what kind they are, William?'

'No — I'm afraid not.'

She took one up and inspected it closely. 'They aren't *very* flabby, Joan. Feel this ——'

Joan felt it and put it back in the dish.

'*Are* they, dear?'

'No, not very.'

Nellie's attention wandered again to the window open before her. 'Beautiful!' she murmured through a mouthful of toast. 'I do wish Justine could be here to enjoy it . . .'

They were silent about the table, aware of her cheerfully roaming voice, but scarcely conscious of words.

'It's because of her work,' Nellie explained to them. 'She feels, you know, that she ought not to leave her work too long — although I'm sure she deserves a nice little rest. Justine is doing so splendidly ——' She paused to break open another egg, intent upon it like a child. 'And Bryce, too, of course,' lifting her ready smile to him. 'I was just saying to Winnie the other evening how wonderful it is the way things have all turned out — everybody busy and everybody happy . . .' Her eyes rested with a sort of fond complacency upon the wet garden with its tulips and lilting daffodils; and the warm spring sunshine lapped about her

gently like a tide of beauty and peace. 'Life,' said Nellie, as if from the peak of wisdom, 'Life is so satisfying when one learns how to live it.'

And Joan and Mr. Blair crossed glances over the table . . .

Bryce folded his napkin and stood up. 'Excuse me, please?'

'Oh, darling, aren't you going to have any more?'

'No, thanks, Mother.'

'Just a tiny piece of toast — I'll break it off.'

'No, really; I have something to fix up before I go —— See you in a few minutes, Dad?'

Mr. Blair finished his coffee hurriedly: 'I'm coming now.'

'But you're not eating,' Nellie protested. 'Won't *some one* have this toast?' Nobody wanted it, so she had it herself.

Joan got up and stood by the window. Beyond the drenched green and gold of the garden was Longfellow Street, and coming slowly up Longfellow Street was a shambling, familiar figure . . .

Nellie's thoughts ran in smooth and tranquil circles: 'Oh, I love spring!' she explained with an expansive gesture that took in everything about her. 'I'm sure only nice things can happen on a day like this, it is so beautiful . . .'

A shade of impatience colored Joan's voice: 'There are things more beautiful, Aunt Nellie.'

'What, dear?'

'People, for instance.'

She considered that pleasantly. 'Why, no, darling, I don't really think so. Some people, of course, are very pretty; but this ——' a vague flutter of white fingers completed the refutation. Then she stood up and shook out her frilly pink skirt. 'Oh! you haven't seen Winnie's canary, have you, dear? Hector brought it back with him last night — such a sweet little thing ——'

Joan was silent at the window.

'I'll run over now and get it before Bryce and William leave ——'

'I shouldn't bother, Aunt Nellie.'

'Oh, but it isn't a bother, darling — and of course you all want to see it . . .' She picked up her cream scarf and hurried out into the garden.

Joan watched her for a moment — the carefully waved hair gleaming sleekly in the sun, the pink dress blown against tulips and daffodils — and then she turned quickly and ran to the door . . .

Mr. Blair came downstairs a few minutes later. 'Well?' he asked her, and his voice was tense and brittle as if he were hardening himself against the sharp edge of disaster.

Joan lifted her face, and there was something quietly triumphant there that answered his question . . .

'May I see it?'

She handed him the letter.

He read it slowly in the dim light of the hall: 'You and Roger have won, Joan.' That was all. You and Roger have won . . . In the suddenness of his relief words were driven away from him as completely as leaves before a wind. He could only stand there, silent, with Justine's note crumpled in his hand.

'It is our secret,' said Joan.

Mr. Blair nodded . . .

Bryce came clattering down, too deeply plunged in thoughts of his own to sense their preoccupation. 'Say, Dad, can't we meet him somewhere for lunch? I want him to know right away.'

Mr. Blair drew himself back to a world where things still remained to be done. 'When . . .'

'What about twelve-thirty at Kenton's — it's quiet there?'

'Very well.'

'And I'll let Dulcie know,' Joan put in; 'we ought to tell

her ——' She stopped short with a warning glance at the others.

Nellie had come up the path and was standing in the doorway against a lovely pattern of flowers and wet grass . . . In one hand she was lifting her frilly pink skirt, light with sunshine, and in the other a brass cage holding Winnie's new canary. The radiance of spring was all about her, outlining in gold the serene rather stout little figure, with blond hair a trifle faded, but eyes as wide and untroubled as a child's — larkspur-blue eyes peering uncertainly into the dimness of the hall . . .

They looked at her in silence for a moment, as they might have looked at a tranquil and softly tinted picture pleasantly hung in their lives: Lady with a Bird, in pale-gold and pink and green with a mist of sunshine over it all, blurring and blinding . . .

And as she looked back, a strange, illusive feeling passed through Nellie as if a veil she had never been aware of were swaying a little to one side. In the poignant stillness of that moment, the dim hall seemed to hold four, not three people. Roger was there with them; they were all standing together, banded by something she didn't understand — and once again she was faltering in a doorway — looking on ——

'What is it, dear?' asked Nellie — old and wistful words that had first been fashioned for Roger.

Then Bryce spoke, and the little interlude, so pregnant with revelation, belonged to the past with a hundred other evasive and halfway things . . .

'Affairs of state,' he said banteringly.

Nellie looked from one to the other, and everything grew familiar and simple again. She smiled — with only a shadow of wondering left in her eyes. 'It is very rude to whisper; I shall have to give you all a little lecture on how to behave ——' Then, quite suddenly, she had a new thought. It ran through her mind like a stream of sunshine, warming and

pleasing. 'Oh!' said Nellie archly, '*now* I know what it's about . . .'

They stared at her, puzzled . . .

'You needn't pretend!' she tilted her head at them knowingly, and laughed — a little rippling laugh of pleasure.

Still they were silent, finding no meaning . . .

But Nellie was satisfied and quite happy. Her birthday was coming next week . . .

2

JOAN stood at the beginning of a long white road. It ran away and away between wet and shining fields, very far away under the wide dawn-sky. The road was empty as if it had just been made; it was running straight and slim to where the day began — this newest day of the whole long world. She stood there, looking into the east with head thrown back to meet the wind. Anything — everything — lay before her; the white road led to the hills . . . to the sky . . .

With the sun in her eyes Joan held out her arms to the new day.

THE END

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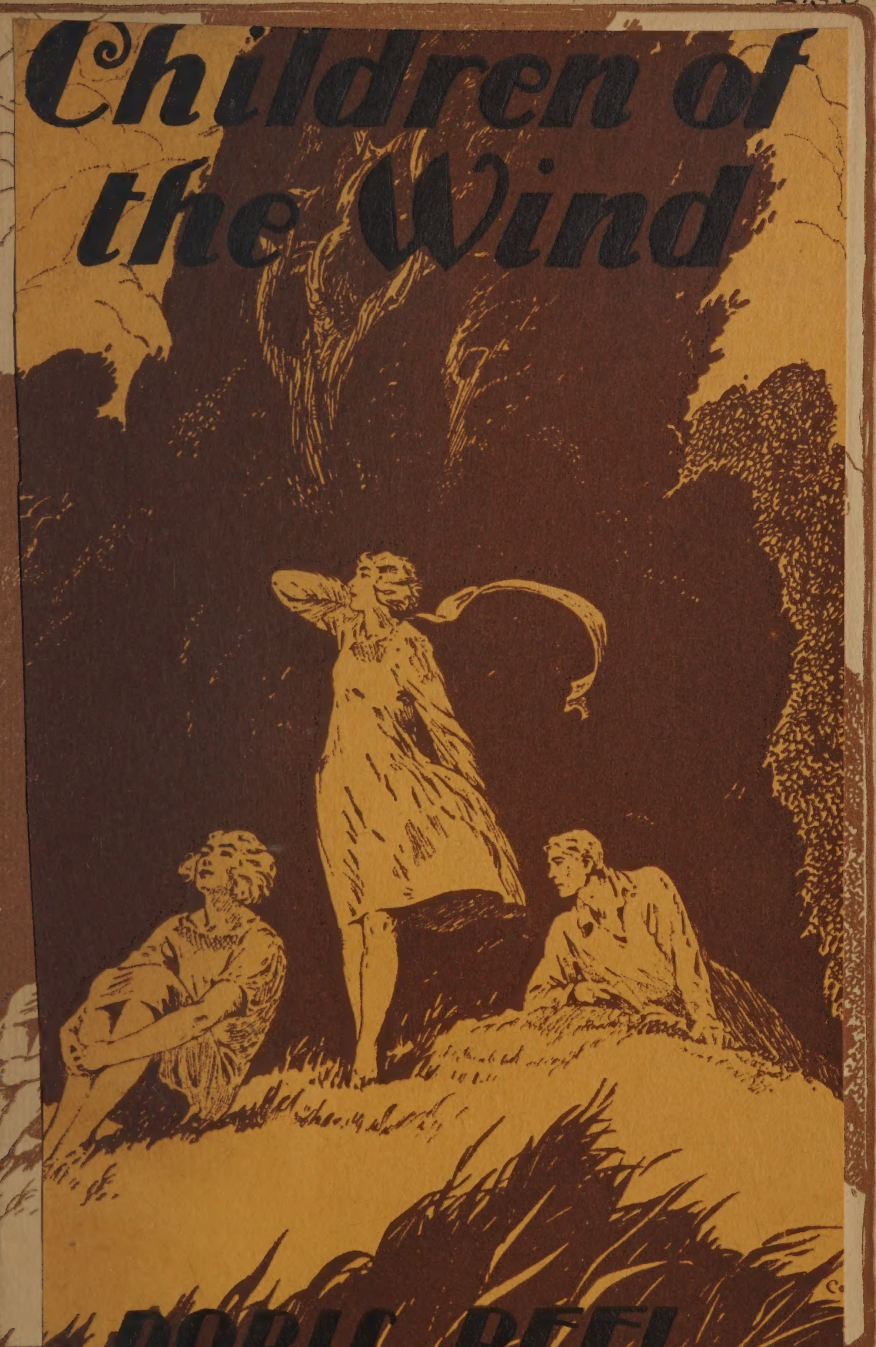
Children of the Wind



POLLY PEEL

DORIS PEEL

was born in England and lived in Canada before her family moved to Brookline, Massachusetts. At four she was picking raspberries in her grandmother's garden in Surrey, at six she took a prize for a condensed version of 'Pilgrim's Progress.' Two years later she was penciling out short stories and reading them aloud to her friends.

Then came school essays and themes, followed by two years in an art studio down South—business college, walking trips, then writing in earnest. 'Children of the Wind,' a delicate, unhurried novel, which any established author might envy, was finished before she was twenty.

'I am frightfully keen over Katharine Mansfield, Barrie, Milne, Morley, and Housman,' says Doris Peel. 'I can't see a thing in most of the Old Masters, but I like Sargent and Monet and Zuluaga. In music I'm all for bangs and crashes and heavy emotionalism — the Ride of the Valkyries and Hungarian Rhapsodies and all that sort of thing.'